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Civil War STORIES

THE
TALL VIRGINIAN

by
BENNETT FOSTER

CAPTAIN SABRE

by
JOHN WIGGIN

ROMANCE AND ADVENTURE
OF THE
WAR BETWEEN THE STATES

THE
GOLDEN SPY

by
DEWITT SHANK

DRUMS
OF THE
WIND

by
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*A Great Novel of the
Blue and Gray*

Drums of the Wind

By JOHN MURRAY REYNOLDS

Crouched behind a stone wall with a telegraph key in his lap, lanky Jed Barrand called desperately for reinforcements. It was "Every man up!" for the Union when Pickett's wild veterans swarmed up Cemetery Ridge, shrilling the Rebel battle-cry. And only Jed Barrand could halt a traitor's bold scheme to smash the Union Center.

BUGLES were calling loudly through the dawn, the short cavalry bugles that are the voice of the mounted services. Their brazen clamor rang out

across the rolling Pennsylvania farm-lands and drifted to the wooded hills beyond. On the picket lines the long rows of horses stamped restlessly and thought of their

morning feed. Tired sentries settled their blue forage caps more firmly on their heads and grunted at the prospect of relief. Now the raucous voices of the non-coms could be heard between the neat rows of tents.

"Rise and shine, you yellow legged devils! Get 'em 'up! Everybody on the line!" The first squadron of the 12th Pennsylvania Cavalry was awakening.

There was a jingle of spurs and a trample of booted feet as the blue-clad troopers hurried into line. The smoke of cooking fires was already scenting the morning freshness. Captain Peter Landon, a grizzled veteran of the Mexican War who had retired from the army years before but was now called back in this stage of the nation's extremity, received his top sergeant's reveille report and walked slowly along the line of B Troop. Then he sighed, and stopped before a tall and lanky trooper in the first squad.

"Your jacket's buttoned wrong again, Barrand!" he said.

Private Jed Barrand's gaunt, bony face flushed a little. As his big hands fumbled to correct the buttons they seemed to be all thumbs.

"So it is, Cap'n, so it is! Mighty sorry!" he said. Then he pulled the sleeves of his tight cavalry jacket down over his knobby wrists and came again to attention.

"Some day you'll put your head on wrong and go walking about the camp backwards," Captain Landon said. The men of the first platoon grinned at the witicism, and Sergeant Nat Wills snickered audibly. The glance of Landon's cold blue eyes shifted over to Wills who immediately stopped smiling.

"Whenever you feel inclined to laugh at any of my remarks, Sergeant," he said, "Do so in private later—not when you're supposed to be at attention."

Captain Landon sighed and walked on. He didn't know what to do about Jed Barrand. He was the one man in this newly recruited troop of raw cavalry who seemed unable to grasp those principles of neatness and adherence to regulation that form so important a part of the structure of discipline. And yet—he was one of the few veterans in the whole regiment! He had served two years in the infantry before his regiment was cut to pieces at

Antietam. The man was a good soldier otherwise. Landon shrugged and gave it up.

THE Union army had more serious things than the correct fit of cavalry jackets to worry it in that spring of the year 1863. The war had gone on for over two years, and the clouds hung heavy over the North. The starred battle-flag of the Confederacy was ever rolling forward through the drifting smoke. From the defeat of Manassas to McClellan's disastrous campaign on the Peninsula, from the Valley of Virginia to the very outskirts of Washington, the Federal forces in the East had been beaten and thrown back. Men were talking of the prospects of England and France recognizing the independence of the Confederacy.

It was true that McClellan had finally stopped Lee's invasion of Maryland at Antietam in the previous autumn, in that bloody battle near Sharpsburg when more than twenty-three thousand men were killed and wounded. There had been jubilation in the north then, but it had been short lived. A few days before Christmas the wild-eyed and heavily outnumbered veterans of Robert E. Lee had smashed the Army of the Potomac at Fredericksburg. Now, with the coming of spring, there were uneasy rumors of another northward surge of the gray-clad legions.

It was very warm, those first few days in May. As the troops of the 12th Pennsylvania maneuvered about the fields in morning drill, they were sweat soaked and dust covered. The scarlet pennons on their lances whipped in the light breeze. The Pennsylvanians of the 12th, mostly broad-shouldered farm boys with a smattering of slighter lads from Philadelphia and Harrisburg, had enlisted to be light cavalry. Then some mysterious mechanism in Washington, eager to copy any odd feature of any army in Europe, had decreed that they carry lances of the Austrian pattern which weighed five pounds and were unhandy things to play with. They made a brave show on parade, but they were awkward to handle in a charge and the men of the 12th regarded them with grave suspicion.

The thought was put into words by Sergeant Terence O'Brien, a grizzled non-com of B Troop, as half of that organization

lay sprawled in the shade of the trees along the edge of camp after the end of morning drill

"Now take them there lances!" he growled, "They'd be foine things for stickin' some Virginny hawgs if they'd let us go after fresh bacon, but I don't fancy them agin a bunch of lively Johnny Rebs with sabers in their hands."

"Rush's Sixth Lancers did good work in the Peninsula Campaign," someone said.

"Aye, they held the flank for the Zouaves when the Zou-zous were in trouble, but they'd have done a sight better if they'd been armed with carbines."

The argument went on, but Jed Barrand had stopped listening. Arguments were the soldiers' stock-in-trade in off moments, and the less they knew about the subject under discussion the more violently they argued. Jed unbuttoned the top of his jacket, and pushed his forage cap to the back of his head. Idly he noticed that a dust covered courier had ridden in from the south and was pressing his weary horse toward the headquarters tent. From a pocket Jed took his harmonica. He put it to his mouth and began to play.

The weary men sprawled about on the grass grinned at the lilting music, and some of them began to sing. The argument died away as others joined in, and soon they were all singing. It was a marching song of the Pennsylvania Dutch that he played, a favorite with the regiment.

"But now I was a sojer been,
To save der Yankee Eagle,
To schlauch dem tam secession volks,
I'm going to fight mit Sigel!"

THEY rolled the chorus again and again, until at last Jed took the harmonica down from his mouth and spat in the dust.

"Reckon I can't play no more, boys," he said, "My mouth's full of cotton wool."

"That's a hell of a song for an Irishman like me to be singing!" O'Brien muttered in disgust. A rasping voice spoke from a few feet away.

"I'm glad Barrand can do something useful. He'll never make a cavalryman."

Nat Wills was dark haired and dark faced, a heavily built man from somewhere near Philadelphia. A sergeant for more

than a month now, he was an efficient non-com but he had few friends in the regiment. Evidently an educated man, he never answered any questions about his history. Those who had played cards with him had learned that his luck with the paste-boards was uniformly and expensively good.

At the moment Wills was leaning his heavy frame against a tree-trunk, his thumbs hooked in his sword belt and a sneering smile on his dark face. From another man his remark would have been taken as idle banter, but there was something in Wills' contemptuous voice that gave it sting.

"Stop pickin' on the lad, ye sour-faced sassenach!" O'Brien growled. Wills' eyes flickered in anger for a moment.

"Jed Barrand needs a nurse. He can't even button up his jacket right at reveille."

"Maybe not, Sarge, maybe not," Jed said, looking up from where he sat with a slow smile on his gaunt and craggy face, "But I reckon I know better than to laugh when Cap'n Landon is talking."

There was a sudden gust of laughter, and a sullen flush spread over Wills' heavy face. Then he ripped out an oath. There was an abrupt and complete silence. Jed Barrand climbed slowly to his feet. He was several inches taller than Wills as he stood there, though his lanky awkwardness made him look ungainly beside the solidly built sergeant.

"I reckon those are fightin' words in any man's army, Nat Wills," he drawled, "If it wasn't for your sergeant's stripes I'd tussle"

"I'll take off the stripes!" Wills snapped, unbuckling his sword-belt and ripping off his jacket.

Wills came forward with a rush, bringing up his knee in a swift thrust at the other man's groin. He was not the first man to be fooled into thinking that Jed Barrand's lack of grace also meant a lack of co-ordination. The lean trooper ducked Wills' flailing fists, twisted aside from the crippling knee-blow, and then caught the other man by crotch and arm-pit. Wills sailed helplessly through the air and landed on his back on the grass seven or eight feet away.

The circle of watching troopers gave tongue in a roaring shout. As Nat Wills struggled to sit up he found the muzzle

of Terence O'Brien's heavy Colt's a few inches from his nose.

"And that'll be all from you, sour-face!" the old Irishman rumbled, "So it was rough-and-tumble ye wanted, was it? Well, ye got it. This should cost yer stripes. I won't report it this time, but if there's any more of the same I'll be after breakin' yer thick skull myself. And anyway . . ." He broke off momentarily as a bugle call ripped out from beside squadron headquarters. "There's something afoot! Officers Call went a moment ago, and now they're blowing Assembly!"

The various troop officers were running back from a hasty conference with the squadron commander as the men hurried into line. Captain Landon's lined face was very grim as he faced B troop.

"We're moving south at once, men," he said quietly, "You might as well know what has happened. The word just came in. The army has been terribly beaten by Lee and Jackson at Chancellorsville, and the Rebels are believed to be moving north again."

II

THE whole camp was filled with an orderly turmoil. The tents that had stood in their long rows were coming down. Baggage wagons had left their park and were lurching from place to place as they were loaded. The regimental sutler—really a glorified peddler—was cursing his negro assistant as they hastily dismantled his shack and loaded his wares into a wagon. The weary and saddle-sore messenger stood nearby, gulping down a bowl of hot coffee and talking between swallows to the handful of men who surrounded him.

"It was a bad mess," he said, "Rotten. My outfit was on the right with Howard's Eleventh Corps, Wilson's division. We'd been fighting the Johnnys along the slopes since morning, and in early afternoon it looked as though half of them were retreating. We thought we'd won a battle! It grew pretty quiet there on the right flank. Some of the regiments had even stacked arms, and we all thought the scrap was over. Then we suddenly saw all the rabbits and squirrels and birds breaking out of the woods on the right as though

running from a storm. Behind them came Stonewall Jackson and half the rebel army!"

The dispatch rider paused a moment, peering down into the bowl of coffee which he held in both hands. Some of the horror of that sudden disaster was still in his eyes. His listeners had all fallen silent.

"Jackson's ragged men came tearing out of the woods like gray devils," he said at last, "Yowling that shrill cheer of theirs. We were caught with our pants down, no doubt of that. They rolled up the whole Eleventh Corps like you'd crumple a piece of paper. The Third Corps came in to stop the rout before darkness, but we were all mighty glad to get back across the Rappahannock again."

"Were any of the Pennsy boys hard hit?" someone asked.

"There were a couple of infantry regiments, the 23rd and the 40th I think, badly cut-up in the fighting along the plank road. Myself, I saw the Eighth Cavalry ride into Jackson's center at a full gallop to slow up the Rebels and give the artillery a chance to fall back and avoid capture. The Lancers got it bad! I saw them ride into the underbrush with their pig-stickers leveled, and only a corporal's guard ever came back again."

The listeners quietly drifted away, back to their various units. The Eighth Lancers was their sister regiment, and most men of the 12th had friends or older brothers in the senior outfit.

"That's what it is to be in the cavalry," a bearded corporal of C Troop said philosophically, "You wait around for hours while the fight develops, and then your part of the battle is over—one way or the other—in five minutes."

"A short life and a merry one—that's us."

Jed Barrand had his horse saddled, his blanket roll and saddle bags strapped in place, and all his equipment ready for marching before anyone else in his troop had finished. Neatness and polish might not be in him, but he could do other things deftly and quickly. Sergeant Nat Wills paused beside him for a minute.

"Take a rag and clean the dust off your boots, Barrand. They're a mess," he said, and added in a lower tone, "I'm not through with you yet."

Jed's craggy face did not change at all. His eyes did not even lose their look of habitual good humor.

"That's all right with me, Sarge," he said, "Only the next time I reckon I'll break your thick neck. I'm always right gentle with a feller the first time." Wills snorted and turned away.

A LIGHT, one-horse wagon had come out of the woods-road and halted a few yards away. It had the black letters U.S.M.T.C. stenciled on its canvas cover. Leading his horse, Jed strolled over and idly peered into the back of the wagon. Then he blinked.

"Well, soldier?" said a brisk feminine voice, "Looking for something, or just stretching that long neck of yours?"

There was a girl in the wagon, a blue-eyed girl whose dark hair hung loose about her shoulders beneath an infantryman's forage cap which she wore jauntily tilted to one side. She wore a dark skirt, and something like a Zouave's jacket. At the moment she was sitting on a stool near the back of the wagon with a telegraph instrument and a mess of wires in her lap. Jed stared at her. A girl was the last thing he had expected to see here.

"Who—who are you?" he asked.

"Me?" the girl said, "Oh, I'm the Queen of England. Who did you think I was, Jenny Lind?"

Jed grinned at her, and rubbed his bony chin. Some women made him uncomfortable, but not this one. He liked the freckles around her tilted nose, and the smile back of her blue eyes.

"No offense, ma'am," he said, "But I'm wondering what a girl would be doing here."

"Didn't you ever hear of the M.T.C.—the Military Telegraph Corps, soldier?" she asked.

"Reckon so. But I didn't know they had any girl operators with the army."

"Well, you know it now."

Just then Sergeant O'Brien came strolling up. He glanced in the back of the wagon for a moment.

"Hello, Sally-me-girl," he said, "Top o' the mornin' to ye."

"Hello, Terry. Introduce your bashful friend here."

"This stalwart specimen of handsome

humanity," O'Brien said, "Is after being named Jed Barrand." In an aside he said, "Straighten out your sword belt before Cap'n Landon sees you!" Then he went on, "Jed, this is Sally Larkin, best telegraph operator north of the Mason and Dixon line."

"Mighty pleased, ma'am," Jed said. The girl smiled at him.

"All right, soldier. No hard feelings. But I don't like to be stared at as though I was a freak in P. T. Barnum's museum. Maybe I do belong there—and none of your blarney, Terry O'Brien—but I'm not going to admit it."

Then the bugles blew again. Jed swung up to his saddle, touched his visor to the girl, and trotted across the field to join his troop. A minute later the full squadron sat at attention with the long lances erect. Major Hoffmayer drew his heavy saber from the scabbard with a clash of steel and faced to the front.

"Right by fours! Forward—ho!" he barked. The 12th Pennsylvania took up the southward march.

III

THEIR route led along the Hagerstown Pike, a broad road lined with rail fences and well-kept farms. The troopers rose at ease through the haze of drifting dust that was stirred up by their passing. Lances swung free behind them from stirrup boots and shoulder loops. The talking died away as they settled down to the routine of the road. For a while there was no sound but the dull trample of hundreds of hoofs, and the clank of saber scabbards swinging against stirrups, and the musical jingle of bridle chains. The baggage wagons creaked along in the rear of the column.

After a while a man began to whistle *Jubilo*. They all took up the chant for a while, and then it died away in the dusty heat.

"Where's Jed Barrand?" someone called, "Tell Jed to give us a tune!"

Jed grinned shyly, and pulled his harmonica from his pocket. He wiped his mouth on the back of his hand, then put the instrument to his lips. Its metallic notes carried clear above the varied noises of the moving column.

"We are coming, Father Abraham,
three hundred thousand more,
Six hundred thousand loyal men and
true have gone before. . . ."

It was a familiar song of recruiting days, and they rolled it out in a deep and full-throated chorus. Farmers and villagers, who had come down to the roadside to watch them pass, took up the refrain and pounded their hands on the fence rails to keep time. At one cross-roads a small boy waving a flag was perched on the shoulders of his grandfather who wore medals from both the Mexican War and the now half forgotten War of 1812. Captain Landon grinned at the old man, and swung up his saber in salute as he rode by.

After a while the column of Lancers began to pass other troops, all moving southward. Units far back in reserve were being called up to counteract this new disaster to the Union arms. They passed a battery parked by the roadside, while the gunners sprawled in the scanty shade of the caissons and the horses nuzzled in the dusty grass. Another time a full regiment of infantry, sweating along under their heavy packs, drew aside to the edges of the road to let the cavalry pass by in the center.

At a cross-roads below Chambersburg they passed the head of another infantry column waiting to swing into the pike behind them. These were dusty veterans in faded uniforms, men of the 18th New York who had been at the front since before Bull Run, and they grinned derisively at the brand-new uniforms of the Lancers.

"Yah—fresh fish!" they jeered. "Look at the rocking-horse soldiers! Fresh fish!"

"Say, sonny boy!" called a bearded corporal in the first squad, "lend me your pig-sticker to roast my bacon on."

"They're just to act as escorts to generals," another infantryman shouted. "They don't fight. Who ever saw a dead cavalryman anyway?"

Most of the troopers grew red-faced and angry, writhing under the veterans' jibes but unable to think of any good answers. Jed Barrand did not mind. Knowing himself a veteran in spite of the fact that he now wore a new uniform, he simply grinned back at the infantry and let it go at that. The young trooper beside

him gripped the shaft of his lance till his knuckles grew white.

"I'd like to get off this nag and give one of those foot-sloggers a dusting l!" he raged.

"Don't mind them," Jed said quietly. "I know how they feel. So will you—some day. Wait till *you* have been fighting and marching for weeks on end. Sleeping in the mud if at all. Eating cold food and drinking muddy water. Then, when you see some new outfit coming out in their bright new uniforms, I reckon you'll feel like poking fun at them yourself."

"I hope we see action at last, don't you?" the trooper asked. He was a young man named Biddle, who had been in school in Philadelphia when the war first started. Jed looked at him unsmiling.

"I don't know that I hope that, exactly," he said at last. "I've seen my share of action in the past two years. I'll take it if it comes, but I don't exactly crave it."

"How do you feel the first time a bullet or shell comes close to you?" the boy asked.

"Bad. You wonder how it ever missed you," Jed said gravely. Then he smiled. "But after the second or third you get used to them, and after that you're too busy to think about it any more."

JED BARRAND awoke the next morning because someone was tugging at his foot where it protruded out the end of the shelter tent. He opened drowsy eyes for a moment, saw that it was still pitch black inside the shelter tent, and kicked out to free his foot. Then he heard a hoarse whisper.

"Come out o' that tent, ye lazy divil!"

It was Terence O'Brien's voice. Jed yawned, then climbed out to stand on the grass in his bare feet. O'Brien held a smoky lantern close to his face.

"Are ye awake at last?" the sergeant muttered. "By the Saints, I thought it was going to take a ten-pound shot to wake ye!"

"What's the matter, Sarge? It's not even daylight yet."

"Nor will it be for several hours." O'Brien was keeping his voice low, not to wake sleeping men in the next row of tents, but Jed saw that half a dozen others of his own platoon had been routed out

and were pulling on their boots. "Two wagons of special stores are going forward at once—colonel's orders—and we're going to escort them. Shake it up, lad. Be on the picket line in five minutes, or I'll lay the flat of my saber across yer back!"

It was still dark beneath the stars, with the eastern sky not yet showing any trace of the dawn. Jed took a long swig of cold water from a bucket that stood near his tent, then moved toward the picket line where he could see a few lanterns moving about. The squadron had rejoined the rest of the regiment before dusk the night before, and all about were the rows of tents where a thousand men were sleeping. Jed sighed, and shook his head. In the infantry you had to walk weary miles with a load on your back. In the cavalry they got you up at odd hours to escort somebody or something around the country. There just wasn't any comfort in war!

Two light wagons were waiting with a team of horses already hitched to each. Smoky lanterns swung under the rear axles of the wagons. Dim figures of lancers were already mounted and waiting. Then O'Brien growled a command, and they all moved out, two wagons with nine lancers to guard them.

The horses walked slowly across the dew-wet grass, bridles clinking and cart-wheels rumbling low. As they reached the pike they were momentarily halted by a mounted picket who sat with carbine on thigh.

"Who goes?"

"Two wagons of medical supplies for the Sanitary Commission at Corps Headquarters," O'Brien growled.

"Pass on, Sanitary!" the picket said, reining his horse back to give them clear passage. Then the harder surface of the turnpike rang under their hoofs and they swung south. The men were hunched low in their saddles, mere shapeless blobs in the gloom. The starlight twinkled on their lance-points. In the eastern sky, the first hint of gray was beginning to smudge the horizon.

THE first hour of that ride was a chill misery, where drowsy and ill-tempered men half dozed in their saddles as they swayed along the pike. Jed Barrand, watching the lantern sway slowly to and

fro beneath the axle of the wagon just ahead of him, was wishing he had stayed in the infantry. Then, when the sun was really up and the air grew warmer, they all felt better.

Men sat straighter in their saddles. Terence O'Brien stretched his arms a moment, combed the moisture from his graying beard with his fingers, and then took his feet from the stirrups to let his long legs hang free. One of the drivers began to whistle to his horses, a mournful little dirge that kept pace with the creak of the wheels. Tongues were loosened—and immediately used for the soldier's immemorial privilege of grumbling.

"We're not cavalry," a lean private from Germantown growled irritably. "We're just nursemaids to wagons and escorts to paunchy old birds with stars on their shoulder straps. They don't understand how to use cavalry in this man's army."

"The Rebels do it differently," someone said.

"You bet they do! Some day our Northern generals will get the idea that cavalry should be used for scouting ahead of the army, and then you'll see something."

"Yeah," said another man cynically, "but you and I will be tangled in our long white beards before that day comes. Anyway, there's no point in sending two squads of Lancers to guard a couple of wagons loaded with drugs."

"I'm not so sure of that, my lad," O'Brien said, moved at last to defense of the army's ways. "We're over in Maryland now, and this border country is an unsettled place. If any of Jubal Early's wild riders are driftin' up this way, they'd be mighty glad to get these here wagons. I hear the Rebel hospitals are near out of chloroform and morphia."

They were striking hillier country now, and the road wound between dense pine thickets. When they halted to loosen girths and give the horses a breather, they were opposite a clearing where a small shack stood on a knoll. Jed strolled up toward the cabin. Then a girl appeared in the door. It was Sally Larkin.

"Why, it's you!" Jed said.

"Me. Myself in person. And, if it isn't my old partner Jed Barrand! What are you doing here?"

"Escortin' some wagons up ahead," Jed

said. "But I'm surprised to find you here, ma'am."

"We of the M.T.C. travel fast—when we have to," she said. For the first time Jed noticed that a telegraph line drooped loosely down from the trees to the roof of the shack. "This is to be a line station. Berkley Corners, they call it. We're expecting your regiment and some others to pull in tonight and establish some kind of a base here."

"But it isn't safe for you to be here, ma'am. They say that Early's rebels are raidin' the border!" Jed protested. The girl shrugged.

"I'll have to risk it, soldier. That's my job."

"Whatever made you do this in the first place, ma'am?" he asked.

"What's the matter—don't you think it's lady-like?"

"It isn't that, ma'am. I plumb admire you for it. I was just wondering."

"They need good operators, and I'm one," she said simply. "Besides, I figure that when the country's being torn to pieces by a war it's the duty of everybody to do what they can about it and not just sit home."

"I wish some of them Copperheads back North felt the same!" Jed said grimly.

FOR a moment they stepped into the shack. The interior was spartan in its simplicity. The instruments were fastened to a bare table, there were two plain chairs beside them, and another chair stood by the wall. That was all except for a soldier's knapsack and blanket-roll dumped in a corner, and a canteen swinging from a hook beside the door.

Then the telegraph sounder broke out with its staccato clicking. Sally listened, then stepped to the table and tapped out a reply. Jed was smiling bashfully as she finished.

"You're right smart with the key, ma'am. I'm a pretty fair operator myself."

"You?" she said. "I don't believe you. Prove it!"

She stepped to the key and tapped out a quick flash to the operator at the next station up the line. "Jake? A friend of mine here claims he's a wire-bug. Just testing." Then she grinned and stepped back. Jed's big fingers looked very awk-

ward on the key, but he showed fair speed as he tapped out the message: "Sally won't believe it, but I worked for a railroad telegraph company once." The sounder clicked out the swift reply: "O.K. You'll do."

"Good boy!" said Sally. "I'll call on you if I ever want a relief."

"I wish you'd call on me if I can ever help you in any way, ma'am," Jed said seriously. Terence O'Brien's voice spoke from the door behind him.

"I'll be after callin' you things you never guessed if you don't come back to the road and climb on your nag so we can get going!" he growled. Sally winked at Jed.

"Don't mind Terry's bark. He's harmless," she said. O'Brien shook his head.

"Women will be the ruin of this army yet!" he said.

AGAIN they rode on, riding at ease alongside the creaking wagons. For a while they passed through scenes of activity. Hammer and ax strokes rang out from half-cleared hill-sides. Squads of engineers, stripped to the waist and sweating in the heat, went past with shovels and axes and chains. Then they passed through that zone, and for slow hours the road wound through woods so silent and deserted that rabbits came out to peer at them.

Sergeant O'Brien was riding at the head of the little column. He rode with his reins loose, swaying easily to his horse's long gaited walk. After a while Jed moved up to ride beside him.

"Y'know," the old sergeant said after a while, "What I aim to do when this war is over, lad? I'm goin' to buy a little cabin I know of up in Lackawanna County, a place where there's a parcel o' vines growing about the door. Then I'm going to set in the sun and"

Jed never heard what it was that the old man was planning to do. A musket spat from the underbrush ahead. Terence O'Brien toppled sideways from the saddle with a round blue hole squarely between his eyes.

For a moment it seemed to Jed Barrand that time paused. O'Brien lay dead in the dust of the road. His horse stood motionless beside him. The wagons creaked to a sudden stop. A cloud of white smoke hung

like an evil mist about the bushes whence the shot had come. And then the whole line of underbrush spewed forth a torrent of men in gray!

There were a full score of them! Lean and rangy men in ragged uniforms, their gaunt faces alight with battle frenzy beneath the floppy brims of their greasy slouch hats, they came bounding forward with a shrill yell. Their bayonets gleamed in the afternoon sun. One or two fired from the hip as they ran.

The 12th Pennsylvania was a new regiment, and most of the escort had never even seen a Confederate soldier before. Their sergeant lay dead in the dust. The sudden appearance of these grim veterans in gray was too much for the nerve of a handful of untried troopers. They wavered and started to break.

Jed Barrand jerked his lance free from the stirrup boot.

"Come on, you yellow legs!" he roared, "We ain't gonna run from a handful of louse-bitten foot soldiers! *Come on!*"

The example of one man has often turned the tide, whether in a full battle or a skirmish. The wavering horsemen steadied, swung around, and then thundered ahead with a ragged cheer. The wagon drivers stood up and drew their revolvers.

The Rebel platoon had expected an easy victory. At the sight of this compact knot of horsemen, galloping toward them with long lances swinging down to the level, they scattered to the sides of the road. The pendulum had swung the other way! And then, with a deep shout and a sudden thudding of hoofs, a full troop of Rebel cavalry cantered around the bend.

The Lancers hadn't a chance. They were outnumbered ten to one by the Rebel horse. Jed felt his lance strike one of the infantrymen with a jarring crash. As he jerked the weapon free, a pair of Confederate riders closed with him. He tried to parry a swinging saber with the shaft of his lance—and then a smashing weight descended on his head and everything went black.

IV

WHEN consciousness came back to Jed Barrand there was a pounding ache in his skull. He groaned and sat up,

and felt his head. There was no blood on his fingers, though he had a lump the size of a duck's egg under his shaggy hair. He must have deflected the blow of the saber enough so that the flat instead of the edge of the blade had struck him.

Jed pulled himself erect, leaning against the trunk of a nearby tree. Sickness swept him for a moment, but then his head began to clear. He looked around.

The bodies of his comrades were scattered along the road for a stretch of perhaps fifty yards. Three horses had also been killed, and the bodies of four Rebels were intermingled with those of the Union men. Wagons and surviving horses were gone. The Confederates had left the lances where they fell, disdaining them as weapons, but they had taken the revolvers and ammunition and most of the other equipment from the slain. The dead troopers had even been stripped of their boots and in some cases of their jackets, so urgent was the Confederate need for supplies in that year of the war.

Jed wriggled his bare toes in the dust, and rubbed his bony chin. He was wondering what he ought to do. Probably the Rebels were some of General Jubal Early's men, raiding swiftly northward out of the Shenandoah. The fact that they had not even waited to bury their dead showed their driving haste. He could start back the way he had come, and eventually reach his own lines again. It was important that the Federal headquarters learn of this raid. But, if it could be done, it was even more important that they learn the numbers and probable future movement of the Rebel riders.

Jed walked over and stood looking down at the four dead Confederates. They were clad in rags and tatters of uniforms, their bare toes protruding through their torn boots. From one who wore a uniform tunic he took a pair of ragged civilian trousers. From another he took a torn checked shirt that had nothing military in its cut or character. It was grisly business, this taking clothes from the dead, but it had to be done. By the time Jed got through he looked like any ragged and dirty hill-billy down from the back country.

For a moment Jed stood looking down at the body of O'Brien. The old sergeant had been his best friend in the regiment,

the man to whom he felt closest. And now Terry was gone! Well—that was war. It couldn't be helped now. The guns were hungry with the same fierce desire that had been drinking the blood of both North and South for over two years, and Terence O'Brien's number had come up. That was all there was to it. Jed sighed and turned away. A minute later he was striding quickly ahead down the road.

Before Jed had gone half a mile he heard the popping of musketry up ahead. He knew the raiders could not have gone far in the time while he had been unconscious. A mile further he came out of the woods and paused to look down the slope toward a small village.

THIS was no mere foray by a handful of wild riders. The Confederates were raiding in force. The rebel horsemen who had cleaned out the village below him were already starting to ride on. A dusty column of infantry was moving northward along the pike. A pair of light cannon bounced along in the rear. There were several thousand of the Rebels, all moving northward through the dust while the smoke of the burning village swirled about them. Jubal Early had come out of the Shenandoah with his whole force, to harry the border. He was like a flashing silver saber driving into the rich farm lands of the north.

Jed Barrand's wide mouth became a grim line. Then, on a sudden decision, he walked down across the fields.

A vidette stopped Jed on the edge of the village—or what had been a village before the Rebels set the houses and barns and hay-stacks afire. A hairy and bearded rider in tattered gray, a giant of a man who held a carbine in one great fist as easily as though it were a Colt's revolver, swung his horse across Jed's path.

"Where y'all goin', bub?" he asked. Jed grinned up at him.

"Down to look at you 'uns," he said, trying to change his normal Pennsylvania twang to the softer Maryland drawl. The Rebel trooper chuckled in his beard.

"Most of the folk around hyar are runnin' away from us, not toward us."

"Yanks!" Jed said scornfully, "We live back in the hills and my folks are secesh. I'd admire to go along with you 'uns."

"Know this country around here?"

"Sho 'nuff. And I know it way up no'th into Pennsylvania. Often driven sheep up there."

"Maybe we kin use you as a guide." The picket broke off, to shout to another trooper who was passing nearby.

"Hey—Randy! Take this lad to Major Duane."

Major Beaumont Duane, commanding the Fourth North Carolina Cavalry now attached to General Jubal Early's swift-moving army, was a slight and dark-faced man who wore a bedraggled red plume in his broad-brimmed hat. He had drooping mustaches, and long black hair that hung to his shoulders, and a pair of very cold blue eyes. His naked saber hung from his wrist by a tarnished sword knot. He was sitting twisted half around in the saddle, with one knee crooked up over the pommel. A long segar of twisted Virginia leaf—the one luxury the Southern troops had in profusion—protruded at a jaunty angle from one corner of his mouth. As Jed repeated his story of being one of a family of hill-folk of Southern sympathies, the Major's eyes never seemed to blink at all.

"Reckon we can use you as a guide," Duane drawled at the end. His voice was soft and almost womanish. "Sergeant, bring me one of those spare horses."

When Jed mounted, Major Duane looked at him thoughtfully through the drifting sage smoke for a moment.

"Ride along with me, bub," he drawled. "And don't stray far away."

"I sho' won't, Major," Jed said.

Duane opened the flap of his holster and tapped the butt of one of his long revolvers. "Better not. Any attempt to run away. . . ." He continued in a voice still softer, almost as if he were musing to himself. "I can bring down a spinning coin at twenty yards," he said.

"Don't fret about me, Major," Jed said with a nervousness truly felt. "I'm a regular burr for stickin' around."

FORWARD! Push ahead again! Early's Rebels never paused for long. The infantry swung ahead at their easy, bent legged stride that ate up the long miles like wild-fire. The two guns bumped and clanked along in the rear, the cavalry screened the front and flanks. The Rebel

horsemen ranged far and wide as they rode, covering twice the ground the infantry traversed. Jed Barrand rode beside Major Duane, pointing out the roads. It did no harm, for the Confederates would have found the route anyway, and meanwhile Jed had a chance to determine the numbers and composition of the Rebel force.

"Listen, bub!" Major Duane said to him once, pulling at his drooping mustaches, "I've heard tell of guides who were really Yankee spies in disguise and wanted to lead a raiding party into an ambush. What do you think should happen to them?"

"Reckon they should be hung to the nearest tree, suh!" Jed said promptly. Duane nodded,

"I'm glad you agree with me, bub. I just wanted to be sure that we saw eye to eye on that subject."

"Sho 'nuff, Major," Jed drawled, "Nothing's too bad for them Yankee spies."

Just before sunset they came into another town. Jed was with Major Duane as he galloped ahead in the advance, with his long hair flying. Behind them came Early's ragged men. The cavalry rode with carbines resting across the pommels of their saddles. The infantry swung forward through the dusk with their long legs pounding the road and their muskets nearly horizontal across their shoulders. Duane slipped from his saddle in front of the telegraph office on the far edge of town, and a moment later the operator looked up into the muzzle of his long Colt.

"I've an itchy trigger-finger, Yank," Duane drawled in his soft and yet deadly voice, "So don't rile me. Now call the next station up the line to the no'th."

The frightened telegraph operator reached for the key and tapped out a call for the next station up the line. Duane waved him away from the key, then turned to a wizened little cavalry trooper who had followed him into the shack.

"Got it, Luke?" Duane asked.

"Yes, suh!"

The little man stepped to the key and continued the message. Every telegraph operator has a style of his own which is as familiar to those who know him as the tones of his voice. Luke Benton, special operator attached to Early's headquarters,

could imitate any man's style to perfection after hearing it for only a few seconds. Listening to the message while leaning lazily against the wall outside the window and pretending to be in complete ignorance of what went on, Jed Barrand knew that no one listening in along the line would ever suspect that anyone other than the regular operator at this station was doing the sending. The message went out in the staccato telegraph style.

"Pass to interested HQ. Patrol 12th Pa. Cav. escort 2 wagons reports brush Early's raiders. E.R. (enemy retreating). No more trouble. S.O. (signing off) for dinner. So long."

"That ought to hold 'em," Major Duane said with deep satisfaction. "Now we'll cut the wire, and by the time the Yanks get around to fixing it in the morning we'll be far away from here."

THE raiders were camping for a brief halt. The horses were watered at a stream, rubbed down, then tied on an improvised picket line. Camp fires twinkled through the gloom. A tin cup rattled in a bucket as a man went to the creek for water. There was a smell of bacon, and the keen scent of coffee. Voices rumbled slow, the voices of tired men, and from time to time a sentry's challenge drifted through the night.

No one was paying any particular attention to Jed. He had shared the scanty food of the men at the nearest camp-fire, and now he sat on the ground a few feet away with his arms clasped around his drawn-up knees. Pipes were glowing through the dusk. The scent of tobacco hung heavy on the still air, and then someone began to sing in a rich baritone. Others joined in till the night was full of song and even the restless horses grew still.

It came to Jed Barrand then, how little the scene differed from a night camp of the 12th Pennsylvania—or of any other outfit on either side. The uniforms were different, the songs were different, but the mood was the same. Men were giving up their homes to risk death and fight for the right—or what they thought was the right. Jed did not hate these Rebel raiders about him. Strong hates were for the people back home who did their fighting with words and arguments—not for the men in the

ranks who did the actual campaigning.

"I wish I was back in Charleston!" muttered a young Confederate who was lying flat on his back on the grass a few feet away, "Charleston as it used to be before the war. In the spring. I'd like to smell the flowers in the gardens along Church Street, and see the girls walking. . . ."

"Stop it, Randy!" growled a grizzled veteran nearby, "That so't of talk will have us all crackin'."

Then a muted bugle rang out near the headquarters flag and muttered commands passed from mouth to mouth. There could be little pause or rest when on a raid. There was a sudden surge of movement as men ran for the picket lines in the darkness. Jed hurried to where his horse had been tethered, but as he reached the animal he took a hasty look around. There was no one very near—certainly not near enough to recognize him in the darkness. He ran right on past the horse and pushed through the wall of underbrush at the edge of the field where they had been camped.

JED BARRAND stole through the woods like a drifting shadow. The moon was up now, and enough of its pale light filtered down through the foliage to give him guidance. Thorns and creepers tore at him, and occasional stones bruised his bare feet which were accustomed to the protection of cavalry boots, but he made good time. Then he dropped flat behind a fallen tree as he caught a glint of moonlight on steel in a clearing a little way ahead.

A Rebel vidette rode slowly past along a narrow trail through the woods, carbines on thigh. Their horses' steel-shod hoofs clinked on the pebbles. Saddle leather creaked. They passed within a few feet of where Jed lay prone on the ground behind the tree-trunk—utterly motionless and trying to keep even the noise of his breathing down to a minimum. He was not seen. The vidette rode off up the trail, and Jed got slowly to his feet again. He was soaked with sweat.

Fifteen minutes later Jed lay in the shadow of some bushes near the telegraph shack. The little building seemed dark and deserted, with no sign of life around it. In the moonlight he could see the cut wires trailing down from the roof. The

Rebels had also pulled down the nearest telegraph poles with their horses, and had cut out a long section of the wire. A fully equipped repair party would be needed to restore service at this point.

Running half doubled up and keeping to the shadows as much as possible, Jed crossed to the shack and darted inside. He paused panting inside the door, but there was no sound to indicate that he had been seen. Hastily he began to go through the cupboards and lockers where the operator had kept his spare supplies. He had to search them by sense of touch, for the only moonlight inside the shack was two shafts that came in the broken windows and lay in oblong panels on the floor. Then he found what he wanted—a Caton field instrument. He thrust that in one pocket of his loose trousers, a few tools in the other one, and then stole out of the shack again. He was scarcely back into the shelter of the woods when half a dozen Confederate troopers poured into the clearing around the shack and he heard Major Duane's soft voice:

"Search that shack to make sure that Yank spy isn't here."

"Shall I fire the place, Major?" someone asked.

"Right."

THE crackle of the flames reached Jed's ears as he quietly pushed his way back through the woods. Before long he could see a red glow flickering above the trees behind him. Jed was making his way along by following the telegraph line, which here had been fastened from tree to tree. Sometimes he lost the single strand of wire among the leaves, but then he found it again and went on.

When he thought he had gone far enough to be safe, Jed climbed one of the trees to reach the wire. In a little while he had the proper connections and ground made, and was securely perched on a branch with the light Caton instrument in his lap. He grunted with relief as he found the wire live at this point, then began to tap the key:

"Calling station at Berkley Corners! Calling Berkley Corners!"

"O.K. Berk. C. listening!" came back the instant reply, "1-3-4? (That was a code signal that meant 'Who is at your

key?") What's going on there? We haven't been able to get you for hours. You don't sound like Sam Higgins. 1-3-4?"

"Jed Barrand, pvt. 12th Pa. Cav., calling from field instrument in the woods," Jed tapped out in reply. Lack of recent practice had made him slow, and he could sense the impatience of the other operator. Then the sounder clicked again.

"Hello, Jed? This is Sally. Are you O.K.? What's up? Everybody worried over silence down line."

"The Rebels are raiding in force," Jed replied, gripping the branch with his knees and passing one arm around the trunk for greater security, "Get this message through to Major Hoffmayer or Colonel Williams of the 12th, or anyone else in authority. There are about fifteen hundred horse and as many infantry. Two light guns. Must have got around behind our army after the battle at Chancellorsville. They burned Valley Center and wrecked railroad. Stop all trains. Now leaving Hooperstown, moving north. Think they're headed over the Pennsy border toward Chambersburg. That's all."

"Are you all right yourself, Jed?"

"Sure. I'm going to work north through the woods and . . ."

Jed did not finish that sentence. Intent on getting his message through, he had not heard the horseman moving through the woods below him. Now the report of a heavy revolver crashed out, and there was a sharp twang as a bullet clipped the telegraph wire a few feet away from his instrument.

"Come down from out o' that tree, bub!" Major Beaumont Duane said in his deceptively gentle voice.

V

DUANE was sitting his saddle directly at the base of the tree in which Jed was perched, the long barrel of his Colt slanting upward. The moonlight touched the buttons on his uniform, and the silver pin that held the plume in his hat.

"Throw down that instrument, bub!" he commanded, "Then climb down. And be right smart about it. My next bullet goes into your head—and I don't miss."

Jed believed that. A man who could hit a telegraph wire in the moonlight could

certainly plug a bigger target. Pulling the Caton loose from the remaining wires, Jed tossed it rattling to the ground below.

"That's better, bub," Duane said, and it seemed to Jed that his captor had relaxed a little, "Now climb down."

Gripping the branches with his hands and his bare feet, Jed began to descend. He wondered why Duane had not killed him outright, and then he realized the answer. The major would try to force him to tell just what message he had sent through. As he reached the clear space between the two lowest branches, Jed let go and dropped.

Major Duane had not been expecting that particular move. He fired as the dark body flashed toward him, but one of Jed's feet had already struck the barrel aside. His other bony heel landed squarely on the major's chest, and then the impact of Jed's weight knocked him clean out of the saddle. His head struck against one of the roots of the tree, and he lay still.

Jed got unsteadily to his feet. Half the breath had been knocked out of him by the fall, but he did not seem to have any broken bones. He caught the trailing bridle of Duane's horse and hastily swung up to the saddle. There might be other Confederates along at any minute. Drumming his bare heels against the horse's flanks, Jed forced the beast through the underbrush until he found a trail and then swung northward at a steady gallop.

The night was cool and still. The road rang loudly under the flying hoofs of Jed's horse, and occasional sparks flew out as he clattered along. Once a dim-seen knot of horsemen—probably a Rebel vidette—shouted and fired their carbines at him, but they soon fell away behind. The night was half gone before he was finally challenged by a Union picket, and pulled his panting horse to a stop.

It was a mounted patrol of Jed's own regiment that had halted him, under command of Sergeant Nat Wills. The man's heavy face reflected a sort of ghoulish pleasure as he lifted his lantern and recognized Jed.

"Well!" he said, "If it isn't Barrand the boy wonder! And dressed like some secesh mountaineer. They hang men for desertion in this man's army, my lad!"

"Take me to Captain Landon or Major

Hoffmayer," Jed said, too tired to argue at the moment. Wills chuckled.

"Take him to the captain, he says! We'll do that, my bucko, and then you'll go to the guard-tent to be ready for the court-martial. Somebody take his bridle. And you keep your hands high in the air, or I'll save the hangman a job."

THE whole camp was uneasily astir. As they rode in, Jed could see that the men were bivouacked without tents, ready to march on a minute's notice. Some of the men sat dozing with their heads between their knees. Those who had lain down to sleep had tied their horses' bridles to their wrists. The stacks of the lances and carbines were dim shapes in the gloom —like the bare poles of Indian tepees.

Squadron headquarters bustled with activity. A hastily erected tent-fly served for shelter, orderlies hurried to and fro in the light of flickering lanterns. Captain Landon of B Troop was talking with Major Hoffmayer just outside the tent as Wills rode up with his prisoner.

"Here's Barrand, Captain. Must have been deserting," Wills said. Landon peered through the dimness for a moment, then grinned and held out his hand.

"Good work, Barrand! That was a brave and a smart thing you did. Glad you got back safely. This," he added, turning to Major Hoffmayer, "is the man who got through that message about the raiders."

"Bully for him." Hoffmayer glanced up momentarily from the map he was studying by the glow of a lantern. He had long gray side-burns, and the general appearance of a bishop, and a deep voice that could carry clear over the thunder of a charging squadron when he chose to use it. "Better make him a corporal, Captain."

"Get yourself some new equipment from the quartermaster, Barrand," Captain Landon said. "Then try to get a little sleep. The brigade is moving in two hours to intercept your Rebel friends."

For an instant Jed glanced at Nat Wills. The conversation had evidently been both a surprise and a mystery to the ill-tempered sergeant who did not know what had gone on. Jed grinned slightly.

"Better shet your mouth, Sarge!" he

said softly, "or you'll be catchin' flies in it."

"But—I thought he was a deserter!" Wills muttered. Landon looked at him thoughtfully.

"A not unnatural mistake at first glance, Sergeant. But did you give him a chance to explain?"

"Well, no . . . that is . . . I thought . . ."

"I'll do the thinking for this troop, Sergeant!" Peter Landon lifted one hand to his mustache to conceal a smile. "Take your vidette back where it was posted. And the next time you have a prisoner to bring in, send one man back with him instead of pulling in your whole squad and leaving a gap in the line."

From the quartermaster-sergeant Jed drew a new uniform. It didn't fit him very well, but then, Jed had the sort of lanky frame that would have been the despair of even a high-priced tailor. At least it felt good to get a pair of boots on his scratched and bruised feet again. He kept Major Duane's horse, a blooded mount that was in good shape for all the weary miles it had traveled that day, but drew a regulation saddle and bridle to complete his equipment. Then he started back to his troop.

Jed was deathly tired. He almost forgot when he had last slept, it seemed so long ago. Stumbling wearily back toward the bivouack of B Troop, with his horse following along behind him, he almost collided with a slim figure that came hurrying out of a half-ruined barn that was now serving as a field telegraph station. It was Sally Larkin.

"Jed!" she said. "They told me they were back. I was worried when the line went dead so suddenly. What happened?"

"A Rebel officer came along and broke the wire with a bullet."

"How did you get away?"

"I dropped on him from the tree and took his horse, ma'am," Jed said. She laughed with a sudden catch in her throat.

"I like the casual way you say that! And is Terence O'Brien gone?"

"Yes, ma'am. He fell at the first shot."

"Poor old Terry!" she said softly. "He was grand. Listen, Jed, take care of yourself. I can't have all my friends in the Twelfth Pennsy getting themselves killed."

JED BARRAND had lain down to sleep on the dew-wet grass, his lance beside him and the bridle of his horse tied to his wrist. He looked up once at the stars, and blinked—and then the stars were paling and the bugles of the 12th were ringing out in a stridently repeated summons: "Prepare to mount . . . prepare to mount . . . prepare to mount."

Mumbling under breath, Jed pulled himself erect and tightened the cinch and then swung up to the saddle. He ached all over, but even the few hours' sleep had done him a lot of good. A minute later they were all in column and moving out to the road.

"I hear they've made contact with the Rebel pickets," someone said in the darkness.

"The whole brigade is going in. That ought to drive 'em back south again."

As always, the men felt better when the sun came up. Instinctively they straightened in their saddles. The scarlet pennons on the lances hung limp and sodden from the evening damp, but they began to dry in the breeze. Somewhere ahead they could hear steady firing that increased in volume. The rippling crash of volleys began to mingle with the irregular fire of the pickets, and then the dull roar of cannon.

"Sounds like a real scrap!" said young Biddle, riding his restive horse beside Jed. "We're really going to see action at last."

"Reckon so."

They swung off the road into a pasture at the top of a long slope. To their left was a regiment of Zouaves in reserve—the Ninth New York. White gaiters and red legs half obscured by the tall grass, the Zouaves leaned on their muskets and stared down the long slope where the sound of firing had reached a steady roll and a haze of powder smoke was drifting up from the thickets along the stream. They were a veteran regiment, weather-beaten and powder-stained, and their tanned faces were calm. Someone muttered a jest, and a g'ist of deep laughter ran along the line like breaking surf.

The Lancers rode across the pasture, their red pennons and red-and-white guidons standing out straight and stiff on

the strengthening breeze. Behind them, moving at a brisk trot, came Hale's Third New Jersey Flying Battery. They rumbled on down the slope, but a young staff officer galloped up to Colonel Williams at the head of the Lancers.

"General Stover's compliments, sir, and you are to hold your men here until needed!" he panted as he saluted. Colonel Williams quietly returned the salute.

"We are ready at any time, Lieutenant."

Still they were waiting. Half of warfare was waiting. Jed Barrand had learned that long ago, and it was even more so in the cavalry. He stretched his legs, and patted his horse's neck, and tried to make some sense out of the vague movement through the smoke down by the river. Then a bugle rang out and the Lancers moved forward again, going at a steady walk.

Now they were passing the stream of wounded that flowed back from the battle along the creek. A pair of stretcher bearers went by with an infantryman whose whole bare chest was wet and glistening with blood. Two Zouaves helped each other slowly along, one with a bloody rag around his thigh and the other with his left arm in an improvised sling made from his turban. A cavalryman from an Ohio regiment rode at a foot-pace, swaying in the saddle as his left arm hung shattered and useless by his side.

The men of the 12th Pennsylvania were green. This was their first battle, this was the first time most of them had seen a wounded man outside of a convalescent hospital. Some looked quickly away, others grew pale. One young trooper half turned out of column, and then resumed his place as a sergeant roared a profane command. Then, as they saw their officers riding quietly ahead and saw that the veterans like Jed Barrand remained steady, they grew a little ashamed of themselves and quieted down.

THE wounded cavalryman saluted Colonel Williams with his one good arm as he passed.

"They're pressing us pretty hard along the crick, Colonel," he gasped in reply to Williams' terse question. "There's a lot of 'em. Must have been reinforced during the night."

Again the Lancers halted, this time in a ploughed field. There had been some fighting here earlier in the morning, for dead men and horses were scattered about. A musket with its bayonet driven into the ground stood up at an incongruous angle. There was a smell of powder-smoke. Colonel Williams slowly rode his horse up and down the front of the regiment. The men had dismounted and were standing to horse, and the Colonel was talking to them in his unhurried voice.

"We're probably going into action in a few minutes, men," he said quietly. "Just remember your drill and obey orders. That way you'll be safest. Your officers know what is best for you. Follow them, and do as they say, and you'll be all right."

In this more advanced position the men of the 12th could see what was going on. The whole course of the creek was bathed in smoke where the two lines were fighting it out. On the opposite slope they could see a Rebel battery of four pieces with tiny figures swarming about them—like toy soldiers come to life. Then the raiders *had* been reinforced! The cannon puffed smoke toward them, the shells burst in the thickets below. Occasional stray bullets whined past the Lancers, or clipped twigs from the scattered trees overhead. Once a random bullet struck home with a dull thud and a screaming horse went down in a threshing tangle.

"The firing seems nearer," Captain Landon said quietly to the lieutenant who rode just at his left. "I think we're being pushed back."

"As usual!" the young officer said bitterly.

"Here come the Zou-zous!" someone shouted.

THE regiment of Zouaves that had been held in reserve was coming forward at the double, muskets bouncing on their shoulders and red legs twinkling through the grass. Jed could hear cheering along the stream now, the shrill Rebel yell and occasionally the deeper cheering of a Northern regiment. The Zouaves went halfway down the slope, formed line of battle, and then lay down in the grass.

A little to the right was a squadron of Ohio cavalry, waiting in a broad pasture. The Rebel field guns had found

them, and they were continually changing station to avoid the fire. The three troops of the squadron trotted quietly from place to place in the pasture, calm as though on parade, while the screaming shells consquare in the middle of B Troop of the much damage. Then a shell landed squarely in the middle of B Troop of the Lancers.

Two men and three horses were blown into a bloody pulp. Two others were wounded. Young Biddle, nervously trying to brush away the bloody flesh that had spattered on his left sleeve, turned a ghastly face to Jed.

"This—this is horrible!" he said. Jed dropped his hand lightly on the boy's shoulder for a moment.

"If a shell has your number, Dick, you'll never know what hit you," he said. "So don't worry about it."

"Good advice!" said Landon, who had ridden quietly over to inspect the damage to his command. He looked at Jed with a faint smile. "I suppose it's not very important at this moment, Barrand, but you've got your belt-buckle wrong side to."

"So I have, Cap'n, so I have! Mighty sorry!" Jed muttered. Landon's smile grew a little broader.

"Major Hoffmayer suggested I make you a corporal, Barrand," he said. "And I'm going to. But for God's sake have someone else sew your chevrons on—or you'll get them upside down."

The Union forces were definitely falling back. First sign of a retreat is the movement of the artillery, and now Hale's Battery burst out of the woods with the horses at a dead run. They dropped the guns in the center of the field just below the Lancers. Limbers and caissons moved to the rear, gunners swarmed about their pieces. Then the guns began to roar and thunder again.

The men of the New Jersey battery worked with the precision of men at drill. As each gun fired, burying itself in smoke while the dust spurted under its wheels as it rolled back, the gunners leaped forward to push it back into place again. Powder-blackened, hoarse-voiced men darted through the swirling smoke with rammers and bags of powder and the round iron shells. Captain Hale sat a big black horse just in the rear of his battery and peered

ahead through his field-glasses to observe the effects of the fire.

A big bearded lieutenant, with infantry bugles on his insignia but astride a dragoon's horse, galloped up to Colonel Williams and saluted.

"Lieutenant King of the 18th New York temporarily on General Stover's staff, sir," he panted. "The Rebel cavalry is moving toward this flank. If they appear you are to go into action at once."

"Very good, sir." Colonel Williams drew his saber, then nodded to his trumpeter. "Mount them up. I can see dust clouds beyond the trees. The Johnnies will be here any minute now."

VII

FEAR was with Jed Barrand at that moment, as though riding stirrup to stirrup with him on an invisible horse. He was always afraid before a battle when he had time to think about it. He knew that he shouldn't be, that it was both foolish and dangerous. He also knew from experience that it would pass as soon as his own outfit went into action, but at the moment he bit his lips at the whine of every shell and it was all he could do to keep his face to the front. Young Biddle suddenly turned to him.

"Thanks for bucking me up a while ago, Jed," he said. His face was a normal color again. "I'm not afraid any more."

"I am," Jed said honestly.

"You? Biddle stared at him. "I don't believe it."

"I'm scared to death at the moment."

"But that's the finest kind of courage, to stand firm when you're frightened."

"Mebbe so," Jed said. "But all I know is that I'm powerful uncomfortable at the moment. If the Johnny Rebs are coming, I wish they'd appear and get it over with."

The firing was steady and continuous on all sides. The shrill Rebel yelling took on a suddenly triumphant note. Then a regiment in blue, the 18th New York, reeled out from the dense smoke that blanketed the creek. They were retreating in good order, firing by alternate platoons, reloading as they trotted to the rear and then turning to fire again. Another retreating regiment appeared beyond them, and then a third.

Jed Barrand, looking down the slope as his troop trotted slowly to and fro across the pasture in order to give only a moving target to the Rebel batteries across the stream, saw the swift disaster that overtook the nearest infantry regiment. There was no apparent reason for it. Heavy pressure was driving them back, but there was nothing to cause a complete collapse. It was just one of those sudden, inexplicable panics that have sometimes seized even the best troops in moments of crisis. The regiment broke up into hundreds of fleeing detachments running wildly to the rear.

It was a grim thing for the inexperienced Lancers to see that horde of fugitives running toward them. Some of the men were even throwing away their muskets as they ran. Their officers tried to stop them, and a platoon of heavy cavalry of the provost guard rode into the mob with the flats of their sabers swinging. They slowed the rout, but they could not entirely check it. Through the swirling smoke behind appeared the figures of men in gray uniforms, kneeling to fire and then running forward again. Above them swayed the square, blood-red battle flag of the Confederacy with its starry blue cross.

The officers of the Lancers had turned around to face their commands as the tide of fugitives flowed past them.

"Don't mind those men," Captain Peter Landon quietly told his troop. "They're only a new regiment caught a little out of their depth. The Provost Guard will take care of them. We'll probably go in and clean out those Rebels any minute now."

Behind the Rebel skirmishers came their main body, a long line of men in gray who trotted forward through the smoke with mounted officers riding debonairly ahead. Captain Hale of the New Jersey battery stood up in his stirrups and raised his heavy voice.

"On the right wing—with canister!" he roared. "Sections retire by prolonge!"

HALE'S guns were pouring sheets of level flame into the oncoming rebels. As each gun fired the gunners dragged it back by hand nine yards before firing again. The caissons and limbers were keeping in the partial cover of some trees a little on the flank. The other Union regi-

ments were holding their ground, and the 18th New York was pivoting a little to the right to meet the threat on their flank.

Then bugles rang out all along the line of the Zouaves who had been in reserve. They surged to their feet with a flash of scarlet and steel. From where he sat his saddle, Jed Barrand could hear the Zouave officers shouting:

"Come on, you Zou-zous, let's straighten out that line! Charge, you red-legged devils! *Charge!*"

The Zouaves went in at the double, cheering wildly. Fifty yards short of the oncoming Confederates they suddenly halted and dropped on one knee to fire, volleying by platoons while the officers stood in the intervals between companies and calmly counted for the men to reload by the numbers. Then, just as the Rebels reached them, the Zouaves surged forward with the bayonet. At the same moment the promise of the dust-cloud beyond the trees was fulfilled and the mass of the Confederate cavalry galloped into sight on the right flank.

The leader of the raiders had hoped to repeat Lee and Jackson's victory of Chancellorsville on a small scale, but General Stover, who commanded this hastily improvised Union brigade, had been prepared for such a move. This was the purpose for which the 12th Pennsylvania had been held out of the fight for so long. Colonel Williams needed no further orders. There was a ghost of a smile on his wide face with its bushy side-burns as he lifted his saber high over his head.

"Lances down! Right by squadrons! Trot out!" he commanded.

Pulling his lance free from the saddle-boot and dropping the long weapon down to a horizontal position, Jed Barrand trotted across the pasture with his troop. For a moment he looked to his left. Another Union battery had come up, plunging ahead with horses at a dead run and drivers bent low in the saddle while the Rebel shells burst around them. They unlimbered a few yards in the rear of the embattled 18th New York, and opened up with canister in a raking fire on the flank of the Rebels opposing the Zouaves. The hole caused by the breaking of that other regiment had now been completely filled. Then Jed looked to the front again.

Rebel bugles were sounding the charge as the gray-clad cavalry wheeled around to face them. The Lancers' own gait increased to a gallop. Bent low in their saddles, with their long weapons thrust out before them and the sunlight gleaming on the lance-points, the men of the 12th Pennsylvania rode straight at Early's veterans. Pistol shots began to crack out as the two furiously galloping lines drew close together. Then they met with a rolling crash!

Jed Barrand had been one unit in that line of nearly a thousand charging horsemen. He heard himself yelling without being conscious that he had opened his mouth, he tucked the butt of his lance under his arm. The man on his right fell backward from the saddle as they came within fifty yards of the Rebel cavalry. A bullet twitched the crown of Jed's forage cap a second later. He saw Major Beaumont Duane leading his North Carolina cavalry to the left, Major Duane with a white bandage under his plumed hat. Then the charge went home.

THE tip of Jed's lance caught the chest of a Rebel cavalryman whose attempt to parry with his saber had been a shade too slow. The jarring impact nearly unseated Jed. He reversed the lance and jerked it free, then drove the sharp ferule squarely into the face of a man closing in on his left. Then he was through the Rebel line, and others of his troop were also through. They wheeled and rode back again.

Jed knew that the tide had turned against the Rebels. He could see that Hale's guns had ceased to retire, that the Zouaves were going in with the bayonet again, that the blue regiments to their left were once more advancing down toward the creek. For the rest he only knew that he was in a wild turmoil where the two cavalry units were thoroughly intermingled. Scores of isolated skirmishes raged up and down the pasture. Jed had thrown away his lance and fought with his saber in one hand and his revolver in the other, controlling his horse by knees and spurs and voice. One moment he would be entirely alone, the next instant he would be in the midst of a group of snarling and furiously fighting men who wheeled and

pivoted and slashed at each other with clanging sabers.

The charge of the 12th Pennsylvania had stalemated the flanking movement of the Rebel Cavalry, and thereby accomplished its end. The survivors of the two cavalry units continued their personal, isolated warfare until a fresh regiment of Union infantry swung out of the woods and knocked a full third of the remaining Rebel horsemen out of their saddles at the first volley. Then the survivors of the Confederate cavalry wheeled and vanished in the woods, and the Lancers were too weary to follow them.

The battle was over. The gray-clad infantry was withdrawing all along the line of the creek, the Rebel guns had limbered up and gone trotting to the rear. The Confederate force was firing as it retired, dangerous as a cornered wolf, but it was in definite retreat toward the southward. The raid had come to an end.

VIII

JED BARRAND sheathed his saber with a dull clash of steel. With shaking fingers he put his revolver back in its holster. Some of the troops of Lancers, what were left of them, were re-forming a little way off, but at the moment he stood entirely alone. His whole left shoulder was drenched in blood from a saber slash. Funny thing—he had no recollection of having received it. As a matter of fact, it didn't hurt very much even now. There was a feeling of numbness there, but not much else.

Then Jed slipped stiffly to the ground. The whole pasture was thickly strewn with the bodies of men of both sides who had fallen in the tumultuous few minutes of that cavalry encounter, but one nearby looked familiar. He knelt and turned the body over, and found himself looking down at the pale face of young Dick Biddle.

At first there appeared to be no mark on the boy at all. Then, when he had ripped open the fallen man's jacket, Jed found it. A small blue hole just over the heart. There was a sudden tightness in Jed's throat as he slowly climbed to his feet again. Also, his shoulder was beginning to pain him. Leading his horse, he

walked slowly half a mile back up the road till he met some stretcher bearers who directed him to a field dressing station established in a tent pitched under a grove of pines.

A harassed regimental surgeon, over-worked by the back-wash of wounded from the battle recently ended, sterilized and bandaged Jed's shoulder.

"You got a dirty cut there, son," he said as his deft hands manipulated the roll of bandages, "but I guess you'll be all right. How do you feel?"

"Not as good as I did," Jed answered with a grimace.

The surgeon nodded. "Shock's beginning to get to you now. Also lack of blood. You'll be back on your feet in a day or so. Get somebody to help you on your horse, and then ride back up the pike a couple of miles till you come to a Sanitary Commission hospital established in a big farmhouse with a red barn. You can't miss the place. Get along now, before you start to run a fever."

Jed tried to swing up to the saddle himself, but he was weaker than he thought and glad of a friendly heave from a passing trooper of the Provost Guard.

"What's your outfit, friend?" the dragoon asked.

"Twelfth Pennsylvania. Colonel Williams."

"Oh, yes, the Lancers. I hear you boys got pretty badly cut up in that brush on the right flank."

"I know *I* did," Jed answered faintly. The trooper grinned in sympathy. He wanted to talk.

"I hear your colonel was killed. Your outfit did well for their first taste of battle. The 18th New York lost quite a lot, and so did the Zou-zous. Anyway, the Johnny Rebs are legging it back for Dixie at top speed now. Merritt's cavalry brigade got here in time to take up the chase."

The dragoon broke off to swing his horse across the field after a pair of deserters who were slinking back through the twilight. Jed heard his heavy voice drifting across the fields.

"Hey there, you, where the hell do you think you're going? Scoutin'? Well, scout around toward the front, you lily-livered baboons! Turn around! Come on, now, pull foot!"

THE hospital in the farm was crowded, but an orderly found a cot for Jed in the barn. A couple of other orderlies helped him off with the wreck of his uniform, and gave him a drink of water, and left him alone. A dull ache from his shoulder spread all over his body now, and his throat felt dry and feverish. He saw many lights flickering beyond the open door of the barn, and he could not tell whether they were the lanterns of stretcher bearers or whether the fever from his wound was making him light-headed.

There were some Sanitary Commission volunteer nurses at the temporary hospital, quiet-voiced women in gray uniforms who went from cot to cot and never seemed to rest at all. One of them rested her hand on Jed's forehead for a moment.

"You've a little fever," she said. "I'll ask the doctor to give you something to make you sleep."

He slept fitfully, alternately hot and cold. A big Zouave on the next cot had been shot through the head, and was moaning steadily. Once, in a short period of wakefulness, Jed looked up to find Sally Larkin sitting beside his cot. For a while he kept quiet, thinking she might be just part of the delirium of his fever, but then she stirred and he heard the stool creak and knew she was real.

"How's the wire-bug, ma'am?" he managed to ask faintly.

"I'm all right," she said. "But the next time I tell you to take care of yourself, you do it. It must have been a terrible battle."

"Shucks, that wasn't a battle at all, ma'am," Jed said. "There weren't enough men fightin' to call it that. It was only a skirmish. The sort of thing official reports will call 'a brush with the raiders.'"

"It was battle enough to suit me," the girl said firmly. "I told you I don't want *all* my friends killed in this war. Anyway, you're not going traipsin' around with one of those silly lances any more."

"I don't understand, ma'am."

"The M. T. C. needs operators very badly, and I've spoken to Colonel Stager about you, and you're to be transferred to our service. And that's that."

THREE weeks later Jed Barrand sat in a telegraph shack on the edge of the vast Union encampment at Falmouth

on the north bank of the Rappahannock, where the Army of the Potomac was recovering from the stunning effects of the defeat at Chancellorsville. The half-healed wound in his shoulder was still sore, and he carried his left arm in a sling for greater comfort, but he was able to sit at a table and do his work. Jed was not the only convalescent rushed back into service in that cloudy spring of the year 1863. There were infantrymen in the ranks with wrappings of white gauze showing on their shaven heads beneath their forage caps, and cavalry troopers whose bandaged hands or arms made difficult the handling of reins and saber.

Men talked of a coming battle that would be greater than any this bloody war had yet known. Rumors traveled fast from the Rappahannock and the Potomac to the Hudson and the Charles. No one was sure what the victorious Confederates would do next, and all men who were able to sit a horse or carry a rifle were called up to the front.

"I don't know what Fightin' Joe Hooker has in his mind," Jed heard a grizzled Ohio artilleryman saying outside his window, "and I sure don't know what deviltry the Johnny Rebs are hatchin', but I'll bet my whiskers that we'll see some kind o' hell break loose before the Fourth of July is past."

"Another advance on Richmond?" someone suggested.

"Mebbe. And mebbe not. But I'm thinkin' that it'll surprise us all when it comes."

The telegraph sounder screwed to the table clicked loudly. Carefully resting his left arm in its sling on the table before him, Jed tapped a staccato reply and then drew a pad and pencil toward him with his right hand. The message was in code. When the sounder fell silent again, Jed opened a tin box that rested on the back of the table and took out one of the several paper-covered notebooks that lay there. Those were the Union military codes, prepared by the Secret Service, which every operator was sworn to defend with his life in the special oath he took before entering the M. T. C. An operator might get himself killed, but he must not let the code books fall into enemy hands.

Jed translated the message, tossed his

original into the stove, and called an orderly to take the translation to headquarters. Then he tossed the code book back in the box and slouched low in his chair. His long face was more lean and scraggy than ever since he had been wounded, and the veins stood out heavily on the backs of his hands. The weeks on a hospital cot had told on him, and he still tired easily these days.

IN a way Jed was grateful that Sally Larkin had arranged his transfer to the Military Telegraph Corps. The work gave him something to keep him busy and relieve the strain of endlessly waiting. There were plenty of things to think about these days, and most of them were not very pleasant.

Jed wondered when the war would end. Sometimes he wondered if it would ever end at all. Perhaps it would all go on forever, while they all grew old in the service and new generations came up to carry on the conflict. The South had certainly been dominant in this part of the country these past two years, though some upstart general named Grant had gained Union victories in the West. The South won many victories—but the North continued to pour new reserves of man-power into the field. From Jed's window he could see the funnel-shaped smoke-stack of a railroad engine puffing black smoke as it pulled to a stop on a siding, could see the wooden cars disgorge their freight of men in blue uniforms. More food for the brazen-mouthed Confederate cannon; more targets for the Rebel sharpshooters. The thing was endless.

A grinning face was suddenly thrust in Jed's window, a face completely surrounded by shaggy red hair and bristling red whiskers. Joshua Flynn, who came from some little town in southern Pennsylvania called Gettysburg, had been a lance corporal in Troop B of the 12th.

"Hi, Jed!" he said.

"Hi, Josh. Come in. What've you been doin'?"

"Wastin' my pay on that damn sutler's wares. Have an apple." When Joshua Flynn came in his bag frame filled the door, when he sat down the chair creaked ominously. He rolled an apple across the table to Jed. "What's new, boy?"

"Nothing much. I'm assigned as a Military Operator with the rank and pay of a sergeant."

"Yeah," said Flynn, "I rate three stripes now myself, after that fracas with the raiders." He squinted judicially at his own chevrons, and then at Jed's. "Looka here, boy, you've got one of them chevrons a half inch higher than the other!"

"Never mind that!" Jed snapped. "A man with only one good arm can't do any fancy sewing. How's the regiment?"

"It ain't the same at all."

Flynn was chewing moodily on one of the wormy apples he had bought from the regimental sutler. Whenever he put the apple up for a bite, the whole thing almost vanished as he pushed it through the bushy mass of his whiskers.

"It ain't the same," he replied. "Terry O'Brien, and young Dick Biddle, and so many of the oldtimers gone. We were shore cut to pieces in that little brush with Early's cavalry! Hoffmayer is colonel now, you know. They buried Old Man Williams on the field that night with his saber for a headstone. We've a draft of new recruits now."

"When did they come in?"

"Yesterday. Along with a bunch of remounts. They seemed to be good boys, and I guess they'll be all right, but it ain't the same."

FLYNN eventually wandered away, and quiet settled upon the telegraph office once more. Jed took his battered harmonica from his pocket and polished it on his sleeve. He put it to his mouth and tried a few bars of *Jubilo*.

*"He seen some smoke 'way up the ribber
Where the Lincoln gun-boats lay,
Put on his hat and he left very sud-
den . . ."*

That had been one of Terry O'Brien's favorite songs. Jed sighed and put the harmonica down again. Then a quiet voice spoke behind him.

"I see that you have other talents than those of the telegraph service, Sergeant."

A tall, middle-aged officer with the eagles of a colonel on his shoulder-straps had come into the room. His quick, roving eyes seemed to take in the entire con-

tents of the little room in one glance. "At ease, Sergeant," he said, lifting his gloved hand to hit hat-brim to return Jed's salute. "I'm Stager, head of the M.T.C. You came well recommended. Understand you have also seen service. That helps. You can better understand the needs of the combatant forces. What would you do if a large force of Rebels suddenly appeared out of those woods across the way?"

Jed stared at him for a moment. Stager's mind seemed to go from one thing to another with the rapidity of a telegraph sounder. Then Jed grinned. He knew what the Colonel meant now. He liked a man like that, who let you use your head when he said something, instead of talking like a drill-master. Jed walked across the shack and opened the door of the small iron stove where a fire smoldered.

"I'd burn the code-books in there right away, Colonel. It isn't just for heatin' coffee that we always keep that stove lit," he said.

The ghost of a smile appeared at the corners of Stager's mouth. His eyes were very sharp and penetrating. Jed knew that he had somehow passed an inspection, not so much by his correct answer to the Colonel's question as by a more obscure means of measurement.

"I guess you'll do, Barrand," Stager said quietly. "I'm going to send a Major Allen to see you soon. Do whatever he asks."

IX

THE movement of troops continued. Cavalry regiments rode in from the north and east, every train brought infantry replacements. There were rumors that Mr. Lincoln was going to replace Hooker as commander of the Army of the Potomac, as so many other leaders had been replaced before him, but nothing had happened. And then, one afternoon, Jed looked up to see a civilian dismounting before his shack.

The man was short and stocky, wearing baggy clothes with boots inside his trousers and a checked shirt. He had a round, low-crowned hat. The stub of a cigar, tightly clamped in one corner of his mouth, smoldered scarcely half an inch away from his short but unkempt beard.

"You're Barrand," he growled, stating a fact rather than asking a question. "I'm Major Allen. Colonel Stager told you to follow my instructions."

"That's right."

"Now I'll tell you what to do."

"There's just one thing comes first," Jed drawled, quietly pulling the tin box that held his code books toward him till his elbow rested on it. "Reckon I'll have to see your credentials first."

The man's deep-set eyes smoldered momentarily. He had very heavy lines that ran down from his nose to the corners of his mouth. Then his face creased in a wintry smile.

"Maybe you're right at that," he said, and handed over a folded sheet of paper. Bearing the signature of the Secretary of War, it gave complete and absolute authority to 'Allan Pinkerton, formerly Chief of the Secret Service, now performing certain special service.' Jed folded the paper and handed it back.

"Sorry, Mr. Pinkerton," he said, "but I wanted to be sure."

"Don't blame you, boy. And call me Major Allen. Now—here it is. There's a bad leak. Our telegraph lines constantly tapped. Code secrets getting out. We're picking a few trusted operators to help us. You're one. Then we're laying a trap for disloyal operators. If you ever hear anyone along the line asking 'when Sam Boole is coming down from Washington'—order that person's immediate arrest!"

THE early days of June came in with a stifling heat. Jed worked in his shirt sleeves, sweat often dripping from the end of his long nose onto the paper as he transcribed the slowly increasing swarm of military messages. One afternoon a M. T. C. wagon drew up out front and a slender, dust-covered figure slid down from beside the driver.

"Sally!" Jed said.

"Me. Myself in person," the girl said, and Jed suddenly thought of that long-ago morning when she had greeted him the same way at Berkley's Corners.

"I've been aimin' to ride over to Jesup's Crossing to see you, ma'am."

"Then your aim has been pretty bad," she said. "And don't call me ma'am. My name is Sally. Anyway, I'm detailed here

as relief operator now. Are you glad?"

"That'll be right nice, ma'am—I mean Sally."

"Your enthusiasm slays me," she said, and Jed flushed, but then he saw that she was laughing at him.

Jed kept the day shift when the bulk of the messages were handled, leaving Sally the quieter night watch. She preferred it anyway.

"I've been living by the light of lanterns for so long I half forgot what the sun is like," she said with a shrug. "If this war ever ends I reckon I'll get a job in a mine. Or something." They soon settled down to a smooth routine, as though they had been working together at Falmouth Station for years. War was that way, Jed found. You soon got used to a place so that it seemed natural to you—even though you knew you might be ordered away at any time.

One afternoon a shadow darkened the door, and Jed looked up to see Nat Wills of the old 12th Pennsylvania standing in the shack. He hadn't seen him since the skirmish with Early's raiders. Hadn't even thought of him since then, as a matter of fact. The cavalry sergeant was carrying half a pie, and his heavy face was less sullen than usual.

"Hello, Barrand," he said. "Nice berth you got here."

"It's all right," Jed said shortly. Wills was obviously trying to be friendly, but it went against Jed's grain to be cordial to someone he disliked. "I didn't know the old regiment was back."

"Just pulled in this morning," Wills yawned. "Been chasing Jeb Stuart's raiders, but he showed us his heels as usual. Have a piece of pie. I think that damn sutler puts clay in his pie crust, but the fillin' is good."

A vague distrust was stirring in the back of Jed Barrand's mind. It wasn't like what he knew of Nat Wills to become so friendly, all of a sudden. The sergeant was peering curiously around the interior of the shack.

"Guess this here telegraph is interesting stuff if you understand it. I wouldn't know a telegraph wire from a picket line myself."

Just then the clatter of the instrument took Jed's attention, and he bent over the

table. Wills was idling across the room behind him. Instinctively Jed glanced at the tin box that held his code books, but it was safely closed on the table before him. Then he shrugged and gave his attention to the incoming message. Probably he was letting his imagination run away with him.

A little later Wills wandered off, promising to drop in again. After a few minutes Jed had occasion to go to the locker across the room where he kept his spare supplies. He reached one hand for the screw-driver he sought—and then remained motionless. Someone had been in the locker! A few minutes before there had been three of the light Caton field instruments stacked on one of the shelves. Now there were only two!

JED knew that he was not mistaken. Often he did not look into this locker for days at a time, but it happened that he had put a coil of light wire there only half an hour before. Someone had taken one of the Catons within the past thirty minutes—and the only other person who had been in the shack was Nat Wills!

Quietly Jed stood up and closed the locker. He took his belt from its hook on the wall, and buckled on his pistol and saber. The theft of an instrument by a soldier who was interested in telegraphy and wanted to experiment might not be so serious in itself. Such a theft by a man who had loudly boasted his complete ignorance of the science looked very suspicious. Now that he thought about it, Wills' remarks along that line had been a little overdone. Just then Sally Larkin strolled in.

"Hi, soldier!" she greeted him, touching the visor of her cap.

"Listen, Sally," Jed said. "It's half an hour too early, but please take over. I've got to go out."

"Anything wrong, Jed?" she asked quietly.

"No. At least, I hope not. There are the code books. Check 'em? All right. I'll be back in an hour."

Jed hastily saddled his horse and then rode up trail. He headed for the area where the 12th Pennsylvania was camped. Perhaps he was making a mistake. Perhaps he should have reported the thing to the Secret Service or the Provost Guard

at once. It was partially loyalty to his old regiment that held him back, and a hope that if he found Nat Wills he would find that the surly sergeant had only stolen the Caton for a souvenir or for some equally harmless reason.

Jed spent half an hour among the picket lines and shelter tents of the 12th Lancers. Sergeant Nat Wills was not in the camp. "Naw, he's not around," Josh Flynn grumbled, standing with his broad thumbs hooked in his saber-belt and his bushy red beard rivaling the sinking sun. "He's supposed to be here to relieve me, and he ain't come. I'll skin him alive when he gets back, the sour-faced baboon!"

Vague distrust was growing into definite suspicion in Jed's mind. The thing was too serious for him to handle now. He went to Provost headquarters and made a formal complaint, then rode back toward the telegraph shack.

It was fully dark by the time Jed returned to the shed that formed his office. Picketing his horse out back but leaving the animal saddled, Jed walked slowly toward the glow of lamplight that marked the windows of the shack. There was a smell of coffee—Sally must have the pot on the stove. Through the open windows he heard the brisk, cricket-like clatter of telegraph key and sounder. He could see the back of Sally's head where she was bent over the table with the lamplight shining on her hair. She was exchanging gossip of the line with Sam Roland, night operator over at Briary Gap.

Jed stood there for a moment before going in. Unthinkingly, the instinctive habit of the professional telegrapher, he translated the dots and dashes of the message Sally was sending out over the wire.

"Say, Sam," her message clattered merrily, "have you any idea when a man named Sam Boole is coming down from Washington?"

JED stood motionless, out there in the sultry darkness. Sally was still swapping gossip with the other operators, but Jed no longer listened to the clicking of the sounder bar. All he could think of was that he had heard Sally sending out the damning message planted to trap traitors, heard it with his own ears. He must order her immediate arrest in accordance

with the instructions he had received from Pinkerton.

With a muttered oath Jed turned on his heel and walked back across the wet grass to where he had picketed his horse. He wouldn't do it! Let somebody else report her and make the arrest, someone to whom Sally Larkin was nothing more than just another operator in the service. He couldn't do it. He swung up to the saddle and rode blindly off into the night.

It was an hour before Jed returned. Then he rode slowly back to the shack and again dismounted in the rear. He had reached his decision. Unpleasant as the job would be, he would have to do it. Not merely was there the matter of adherence to his oath. A leak in the Federal lines of communication might cost thousands of lives. He would have to place Sally under arrest, but once she was taken over by the Provost Guard he would do all in his power to help her.

Holding his saber under his arm to keep it from clanking, Jed walked slowly around to the front of the little frame building. At the moment his gaunt face looked lined and old. He heard the steady clatter of the telegraph inside, but when he entered the room Sally was no longer there. A man was bent over the table in her place.

For a moment Jed's fingers loosened the flap of his holster. Then he recognized the stocky, bald-headed figure of the man at the key. It was Billy Sillcox, general handy man and relief operator attached to the Falmouth headquarters. As Jed walked farther into the room the man looked up.

"Hello, Jed!" he said. "I thought that you . . ."

"Where's Sally?" Jed interrupted.

"Why, she asked me to spell her and left here half an hour ago. Went with a sergeant from your old regiment. Chap named Wells, or Wills, or something of the sort. They both seemed sort of worried about you."

"Reckon they were!" Jed said grimly. "Billy, I think I've been a fool. Anyway, there's something rotten going on. You stand the watch. And, if either of those two show up around her again, call the Provost Guard. I'm going out to look . . ."

Jed was interrupted by the thud of galloping hoofs just outside. A man leaped

to the ground without waiting for his horse to stop, then ran into the shack with his saber banging. It was a dust-covered officer of General Hooker's staff, hatless and wild-eyed.

"Where's the chief operator?" he panted. "You, Sergeant? Get to that key and clear all wires. Send this message north to the War Department as fast as you can pound it out: 'Lee has crossed the Potomac with the entire Army of Northern Virginia and is moving north through Hagerstown in a blow at Washington, Harrisburg and the North!'"

BUGLES rang through the night, sounding the strident call to arms. Throughout the whole vast encampment there was a murmurous surge of movement. Regiments struck their tents by the light of flickering lanterns. Baggage wagons rolled creaking through the darkness with the drivers cursing each other and their horses.

Bill Sillcox and Jed spelled each other at the key all night long, sending and receiving the endless stream of messages that kept the wires jammed to capacity. Lee was already well to the north of the Army of the Potomac, his gray-clad legions pouring out of the Valley of the Shenandoah in an endless torrent, and the telegraph wires hummed with messages to all the scattered Federal Corps and commands.

There was no trace of either Sally Larkin or Nat Wills. The Provost Guard could not locate them. Probably they had escaped through the line of videttes to the southward. Jed had little time to think about them during that night—and was duly thankful for it.

The level rays of the morning sun had been shining squarely into the windows of the cabin when Jed lay down. They were only a little higher, splashing the rough board floor with warm June sunlight, when Billy Sillcox prodded Jed in the ribs with one of his square-toed, cowhide boots.

"Come on, Jed!" the bald little man said hoarsely, one ear cocked for the click of the instrument which had momentarily fallen silent. "No rest for the wicked."

"What's the matter?" Jed sat up with an effort. His eyes burned, and there was a dull ache in the back of his skull.

"Orders from Old Man Stager for you to go with Buford's Cavalry division as field operator. They're already moving out. There's a wagon with a driver and two linemen and full field equipment waiting out front for you now."

"All right, Bill." Jed pulled on his boots and buckled his belt. Then he picked up his saddle-bags and turned to the door. "Be seein' you."

"Don't let the Johnny Rebs get any farther north than Boston, whatever you do," Sillcox said.

X

THE two great armies, the most formidable groups of armed forces that the world had yet seen in that year 1863, were both racing northward at top speed. Lee was to the left, but slanting steadily eastward toward Harrisburg. Meade—who had succeeded Hooker in command of the Union forces a few days before—was keeping his army between the Rebels and the Federal capital. Every man in both armies knew that a clash was bound to come in the next few days. The tide of the Confederacy was rising to its peak, with nearly seventy-five thousand veterans pouring northward into Pennsylvania. One more decisive victory for the Confederates at this point, and there was danger that the entire northern resistance might collapse.

It was near dusk on the thirtieth of June that Jed Barrand reined in his horse on a low hill somewhere in southern Pennsylvania. He was riding with the headquarters staff of Buford's cavalry division, a swift-moving unit groping for contact with the Rebel advance guard. General Buford pushed his slouch hat to the back of his close-cropped head and peered down through the gathering twilight at the pleasant houses and tree-lined streets of a drowsy little village. It looked as though it might have a population of fifteen hundred people.

"What's that place?" he snapped. A staff officer had dropped the reins to his horse's neck and was looking at a map.

"It's called Gettysburg," he said. Buford shrugged.

"Never heard of it."

"That long ridge is called Seminary

Ridge," the staff officer continued. "That taller hill is Round Top. Then . . ."

"Never mind all that now," Buford said impatiently. "We'll be riding on in the morning. All right, gentlemen, we'll camp here tonight. Sergeant, see if you can get into wire communication with Corps headquarters and tell them we've seen no sign of Lee yet."

Jed saluted and turned away, but before he rode over to his wagon he twisted in the saddle to look back at the village in its rolling valley. The war had really come to the North at last. Somewhere off in this same twilight, Jed knew, there were long columns of men in ragged gray uniforms swinging steadily forward. Elwell's men were coming, and Longstreet's veterans—all the flower of the Confederacy. Even now they were probably pounding forward through the dusk, singing their endless marching song:

*"Cheer, boys, cheer! No more of idle sorrow;
Let us forget the darkness of today.
Hope points before and shows a bright tomorrow. . . ."*

Jed shivered a little as he turned away. He had a sense of tragedy impending. The victory might go to either North or South when the two armies finally met, but—whatever the result—it would probably plunge a nation into mourning.

The next dawn was clear and still. Jed Barrand, cantering down through the town in search of General Buford, found the cavalry commander and his staff sitting their horses in front of the tavern on the main street of Gettysburg. A few villagers stared at them curiously from nearby doorways. Jed saluted.

"General Reynolds is a few miles away with the First and Eleventh Corps, sir," he reported.

"That's good," Buford said absently. He was training his field-glasses on a haze that rose above the woods and fields to the westward.

"Think the Rebels be a-comin', General?" asked an old graybeard who leaned against the tavern wall. Buford did not even take his glasses down from his eyes.

"Guess so, Pappy. If those dust clouds don't mean plenty of marching men—and

I mean plenty!—then I'm a potato farmer."

JUST then a brisk and well-fed major of the Quartermaster Corps came trotting down the street. He looked in surprise at the little cluster of cavalry officers.

"I'm surprised to see you here, General!" he said to Buford. "General Wadsworth sent me over to requisition a supply of new shoes for his corps."

"Shoes!" Buford said blankly. "Shoes. The man wants shoes." He turned around and stared unsmiling at his staff. The major began to look red and uncomfortable. "You'd better get right back to your command, Major," Buford said.

"Why, what's the matter, General?" the major asked.

Just then the sound of a single shot came drifting across the fields to the west. It was sharp and clear on the morning air.

"That's the matter!" Buford roared. He was a Kentuckian, and sometimes excitable. Then he drove home his spurs and clattered up the street. "Come on, gentlemen! He'll have to hang on some way till the infantry shakes the lead out and gets here to support us."

The line of Seminary ridge became ringed with smoke as the gray-clad legions swung forward. Their blood-red battle flags swayed above them, their shrill yelling rose above the noise of the musketry. Jed Barrand crouched at the base of a tree with his drawn revolver beside him and his telegraph instrument on his knee. He saw Buford's troopers selling their lives as dearly as they could as they tried to stem the advance of many times their number. He saw the blue-uniformed infantry of the First and Eleventh Corps under General Reynolds fling themselves into the fight as each regiment came up.

Bullets dived past Jed, or smacked into the tree trunks, or clipped off twigs that fell lightly to the ground. He saw General Reynolds shot down by a Rebel sharpshooter along the edge of McPherson's woods. He was near enough to see the gallant charge of the First Minnesota, when an entire regiment was cut down to a handful of less than forty men in five minutes—but managed to hold off the Confederates until a new line of defense could be formed. And always Jed's key was

busy, constantly calling, calling for reinforcements.

In the afternoon the shattered remnants of Buford's cavalry began to fall back through the town of Gettysburg. With them rode the survivors of the 12th Pennsylvania. The infantry were also in retreat, stubbornly and slowly, the men of Merritt's Iron Brigade leaving seven distinct lines of dead behind them to mark different lines of battle. Jed Barrand went with them, reeling up his wire as he fell back. That night survivors lay in a long semi-circle from Culp's Hill to Round Top. Though heavily outnumbered in the fighting, they had delayed Lee's advance for an entire day, and now every hour brought fresh reinforcements pouring into the line.

A DAY and a half later the battle still went on. Forty thousand men had fallen on the field, but the roll of the guns was an unceasing thunder. It was early afternoon on the third of July.

Jed Barrand and Bill Sillcox were crouched in the shade of a rag of canvas that they had spread in a corner of a stone fence. There was a many days' growth of beard on Jed's chin. The sunken eyes in his dark face were like burnt holes in a piece of weathered canvas.

Another message clattered in over the wires. Jed shouted for an orderly. There was one nearby, but as he turned at Jed's call he suddenly coughed and fell backward over the fence with a minnie-ball in his chest. Jed handed the field instrument to Sillcox.

"Carry on, Billy!" he snapped. "I'll go myself."

"Okay," Sillcox said. The voices of both men had dwindled to hoarse croakings from the constant attempt to shout above the roar of the firing.

WEBB'S Division of Hancock's Corps was holding the center of the line on Cemetery Ridge. A cluster of haggard-eyed men in dusty blue, they crouched behind the wall while their musket barrels grew hot to the touch. For two hours now the massed artillery of both armies had been shelling each other with a demoniac frenzy, the crash of bursting shells mingling with the brazen-mouthed thunder of the guns. Just as Jed delivered his

message, the Confederate cannon suddenly ceased firing. Men stared at each other in puzzled surprise.

Then a mounted dispatch rider, a cavalry sergeant, galloped up to General Webb. His horse was lathered with foam.

"General Hancock's compliments, sir, and you are to withdraw your men to the rear at once."

"What the hell!" Webb said. "Are you sure?"

"Absolutely, sir. Right away. . . ."

Jed knew that voice! He sprang ahead—and looked into the startled face of Nat Wills!

"That man's a spy and a traitor!" Jed shouted, and in the same instant Wills wheeled his horse. He knew that the game was up, that his bold attempt to weaken the center of the Union Line at this crucial moment had failed.

"Somebody shoot that man!" Webb roared. Jed pulled his gun from its holster, but a trooper of the escort fired from the saddle and Wills fell sidewise from the back of his galloping horse. Jed ran toward him, his boots slipping on the grass.

Nat Wills was still alive, but his face had gone the color of old paper. He looked up with the ghost of a smile.

"No hard feelings, Jed!" he whispered. "I was working for the South all the time. I'm really from Georgia, though educated in Philadelphia. I fought for my own."

"What about Sally, Nat?" Jed gasped. "Where is she?"

"Sally . . ." Nat Wills whispered, and then his voice failed. He breathed once—and died.

Jed sighed and rose to his feet—but he had no time to regret that Wills had not lived a few minutes longer. Now the Union line could see the reason for the sudden cessation of the Confederate artillery fire. The crisis had come!

Out from the woods of the Rebel center came charging waves of infantry. Rank after rank of them, fifteen thousand strong, the fresh troops of Pickett and Pettigrew, they swung across the fields with their muskets shouldered and their cross-barred battle flags floating over them. Mounted officers rode before them. The high-pitched, treble battle-cry of the Southland rose above the roar of the muskets.

A few regiments were singing, their mouths wide open, though the sound scarcely carried at all:

*"Cheer, boys, cheer! No more of idle sorrow,
Let us forget the darkness of today . . ."*

The Union lines swam in smoke from one end to the other. The hammering of the muskets was a giant surf. The artillery belched flame and smoke as fast as the sweating and powder blackened gunners could serve the guns. From battery to battery went the grim command that comes only in dire extremity: *"With grape or canister! By pieces . . . at will! Fire!"*

DEADLY blasts of grape and canister ripped holes in the charging ranks, but the gaps were filled and still the gray-clad lines came on. The blood-red, bullet-whipped battle flags went down, and were quickly snatched up again. The sound of rifle fire was like the ceaseless beat of a giant rain, and still the gray-clad ranks came on. The flower of the Southland swept ahead across the bodies of its countless dead, the tide of the Confederacy was reaching its height across the trampled fields of Pennsylvania.

Union reinforcements were rushing to the threatened sector from every part of the field. It was every man up. Cavalry horse-holders let the mounts go wild to add their carbines to the dwindling line of defense. Wounded men braced themselves against the stone wall so that they could still fire. Jed Barrand took the musket of a dead infantryman and found a place along the wall. The telegraph would wait. The butt of the weapon banged and jolted against his shoulder as he fired into the charging gray mass.

That charge of Pickett's men was madness. It was Lee's one great blunder. Even Longstreet himself refused to obey the order. It was sheer suicide—and yet it almost succeeded. Up to the very wall behind which Jed crouched swept the gray wave, while bayonets gleamed through the flame-wracked smoke, and the Confederate General Armistead stood atop the wall for an instant before he was shot down.

Then it was over! Like a great wave

broken by a sea-wall, the shattered gray legions began to flow backward. The retreat became a rout, the entire attack broke up. The peak of the tide had been passed. The fine silver saber of the Confederacy had been irredeemably shattered against the blood and smoke-splotched fieldstones of Gettysburg. It was too early to realize it now but that was the way Jed Barrand always saw it later on.

He laid aside the rifle and walked slowly back toward his station. A bullet had creased him lightly on the cheek and he mechanically brushed the blood aside. It was over. But many brave men had died that day!

ASHELL had landed near the improvised telegraph station. Bill Sillcox was stretched out with his bald head in the weeds and his booted feet sticking straight upward. He was dead, but the clicking of the key showed that someone had taken his place. Jed peered under the canvas. Sally Larkin was sitting on the grass with the instrument in her lap.

"Sally!" he gasped. She looked up with a tired smile.

"Hello, Jed. Oh, you're hurt!"

"It's nothing. I'll wash and bandage it," he said, "But you shouldn't be here."

"Someone had to take Billy's place, and I was the only one available."

"But . . . but where have you been?"

"It's a long story, Jed," she said wearily, "I didn't know that Nat Wills was a spy when he asked me to inquire about a man named Sam Boole. Then he must have known that something had gone wrong. He got me out of the shack by claiming that you had been hurt in a fall from your horse, then he held me prisoner for several days. I'll explain later how I got back to our lines."

A great relief swept over Jed Barrand. Somehow it left him very weak. He sat heavily down on the grass, and for a moment he rested his head against the stone wall behind him.

"Sally," he said, "I reckon you'll never know how badly I was worried about you."

She lightly touched his hair.

"That's all right, soldier," she said, "I'm back safely now. Me. Myself in person."

"Reckon you are, ma'am," Jed said.

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The Tall Virginian

A Novel of the War in Virginia

By BENNETT FOSTER

JOHNSTON was in the West, and Lee in Virginia, and the rain fell on the weary miles between them in that year of '65. Major Galen Kittridge rode through the rain, the splatter of its drops muffling the beat of his charger's hoofs and softening the drawling voice of old

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Dad Summers as he commented to Bert Loy about the Virginia mud and weather. The mud slopped underfoot and the three horses were weary and the men bone tired. Many times they had followed mud filled roads; dry roads, too. To Manassas and to Chancellorsville, to the Wilderness and



Johnston in the West, and Lee in Virginia. The fires of the Confederacy burned low after four years of bloody war, but Major Galen Kittridge still fought on. For him and a gallant-eyed girl, there could be no parole with Destiny.

to Shiloh, to Gettysburg and along the pleasant lanes of Pennsylvania when Jeb Stuart circled and went north; all those roads they had followed and now, once more, they were going back to Lee.

Veterans these—the major and the two troopers—and the rain was dark on their shoulders and on the glossy bay coats of their horses. It dripped from the brim of the slouch hat that well set-up Galen

1—Civil War Stories—

Kittridge wore, the hat that, so gaily in '61, had sported a plume. It soaked through the thin gray cloth that covered his shoulders, darkening the collar that sported the insignia of his rank. Rain . . . rain . . . rain all over the South.

Lee was at Richmond and Johnston in the West. Slumping in his saddle, Kittridge considered that fact. He was not a strategist. He had earned his majority through fighting, not tactics, but he knew that the

situation was desperate. Two weeks ago he had ridden south, carrying dispatches. Now he was returning and all along the way he had seen the devastation of war and had witnessed the collapse of the Confederacy, the one thing left that was dear to him.

Conscription in the South had failed. Deserters from the Southern armies, from the Northern armies too, pillaged the country. There were no crops, there were no lines of transportation to carry supplies. There were no supplies. Young Loy's voice came sharp to Galen's ears and, automatically he reined Marshal to a halt.

"Heah's the fawks, Majah," the young, tired-faced trooper said.

The lane they followed branched before them. Kittridge's big bay had his head pointed to the right, and Loy, riding abreast of his officer, asked a question. "Do we take the Co'thouse ford?"

"The Courthouse," Galen directed and rode on, swinging his mount toward the right. Loy fell back and Galen could hear Old Dad Summers resume his never-ending argument. From the Missouri west Dad knew the country. Montana and the Indian Territory, Texas and California, Dad knew them all. His long Sharps Berdan rifle, still covered with the buckskin sheath that Dad refused to part with, lay across his saddlebows. His weathered, old face was alert as he drawled his comment.

"We'uns is about whupped anyhow," Dad said. "Yo' mought as well figger where yo'll go next, Bert."

Galen lifted his head to speak a sharp remonstrance and then did not voice the words. Summers was right, they were about whupped. In Kittridge's saddle pockets there were dispatches and in his mind a message that Johnston had not entrusted to paper. Lee wished to effect a union with Johnston, wished to consolidate the fighting men of the South. Galen Kittridge had carried that word south.

Now, returning, he brought Johnston's message. Johnston, slim, round-headed Johnston with the gray mustache and goatee, was willing and would fight. He would move north despite the lack of transport and supplies, despite the fact that his infantry was walking on their bare feet, despite all the obstacles in his path. Near Danville he would hope to meet his chief

and then, with the last of the Confederacy joined together, there would be a last, desperate stand. Such was the message that Galen Kittridge carried in his head, a message that could be entrusted only to a man who had been proved in the fiery furnace of war.

"We ain't whipped till we been purely licked," Bert Loy said. "They ain't whipped Marse Robert yet."

THAT was true. At Richmond the Good Gray General still waited, holding an army about him. All across Virginia Grant's blue clad snake had coiled its way, destroying all it touched and yet not victorious. In the west Johnston confronted Sherman, and in the Trans-Mississippi Kirby Smith still led a fighting force. They were not done until they were purely licked. The big bay, Marshal, swung his head to right and left and, roused from his thoughts, Galen Kittridge looked about him, peering through the rain.

This was familiar country. This field to his right had been the scene of his first successful fox hunt. There, by that knoll he had dropped from his saddle and, whipping off the hounds, taken the brush of the fox. He had given it to Zoe.

Beyond the knoll, where the trees still rose high, was Beckwith's House. On the polished floor of Beckwith's ballroom he had danced with Zoe. Along this very mud-filled lane they had ridden together, bound for Beckwith's Courthouse and the church. Not two hundred yards ahead, where the Roanoke shallowed for the ford, he and Zoe. . . .

"Hawses been a usin' in the road, Majah," Dad Summers drawled. "A right sma't of hawses been a usin' heah."

It was so. Galen Kittridge looked at the muddy road and saw the hoof prints, the tracks filled with water, the mud churned.

"Yes," he said.

"Mebbe," Dad ventured, "I mought ride ahead, Majah. Theah mought be somethin' at the ford."

"We'll ride together," Kittridge decided. "These tracks were made by a patrol or foraging party. There's no one at the ford."

Dad grunted. "Theah mought be," he expostulated but fell back into place again.

Alert now, wakened by Summers' voice

Kittridge rode ahead. This was the better of the fords, this that led to Beckwith's Courthouse. The ford above, with the river risen as it was, could hardly be called a ford at all. There was swimming water above, but here the shallows ran, hock deep on a horse. Dad Summers was sliding the Sharps Berdan from its case, "Dolly" he called the rifle. In the Wilderness Dad had climbed a tree with "Dolly," and fought through the bloody days. How many men had Dad and Dolly left in that wild tangle of trees and brush? Galen did not know. He wondered if ever, in all the years to come, the men who had fought that Wilderness fight and died therein would be found. Perhaps on Judgment day. . . . Marshal paused at the ford, head lowered to drink.

While the horses drank Kittridge and his companions scanned the timber across the river. Summers fussed with the Sharps and Loy sat stolidly, reins loose, letting his horse drink.

"Don't like it," Summers stated. "They ain't nothin' movin' across theah."

"Nothing out in the rain," Kittridge answered. "Marshal's quiet enough. If there were horses he'd scent them."

"Not in the rain," Summers answered. There was a familiarity between these two, officer and man, that was greater than rank. They knew each other and in that knowledge had found a thing that bound them. Loy was not of their compact. Loy was loyal, Loy had known Kittridge all his life and worshiped the man blindly; but between Loy and his officer there was no tie save that of devotion and of loyalty.

"We'll see," Kittridge decided and pushed Marshal ahead.

The horse entered the ford willingly enough, hoofs sliding on the stones. In midstream he turned quartering, so that he partially faced the current, and splashed on across. Summers and Loy followed the major, their horses slipping and sliding up the muddy bank.

"Just a patrol or a foraging party," Kittridge repeated. "Those tracks were old."

"Mebbe," Summers grunted skeptically. "Mebbe not. I think. . . ."

THE Sharps Berdan came up to his shoulder, bellowed once, and smoke mushroomed at its muzzle. Through the

trees Kittridge could see movement. A mounted man, blue uniform almost black because of the rain, appeared in the road ahead. There were others moving through the trees. Behind the major, Loy fired twice and yelled shrilly, and then there came a crash of gunfire from the timber and the major's mount had whirled, slipping and sliding in the mud, and Galen Kittridge was riding back once more toward the ford, the way they had come, Dad Summers and Loy ahead of him. Summers looked back and yelled over his shoulder: "Go on through!" and swung his horse wide. The major's mount closed the gap and sped past Summers' horse, to squat and slide down the bank to the ford, while behind Kittridge the guns roared.

He was in the center of the ford before Marshal slowed. Turning, the long Colt from his saddle holster in his hand, Kittridge saw that Summers and Loy were following him, and that a half troop of blue clad cavalry was splashing close behind. He lifted the Colt and fired twice, shooting low at the foremost horses. Dad Summers, imbued with the same idea that possessed his officer, lifted the Sharps again and two horses went down in a fountain of spray. But others still pushed on, and bullets whaled by.

Lifting the Colt, Kittridge again pulled trigger but the gun missed fire and with a curse he thrust it back into the saddle holster. Summers came by him, pushing another load into the Sharps, and Loy, with the Spencer carbine that he had taken from a Union Cavalryman lifted high above his head, splashed by on the other side. Looking back, Kittridge could see that some of the blue-clad men were pushing around the horse barricade and he swung his mount to meet them, drawing his saber as he turned the horse.

The first of the Union men was young. Disdaining the gun he held in his left hand, he had drawn saber and spurred toward Kittridge where the gray officer sat, blocking the narrow ford. A glance showed Summers and Loy mounting the further bank as Kittridge turned back to meet the oncoming enemy.

He was a lieutenant, this blue-clad boy who came splashing ahead, young and eager and impetuous. His face, smooth shaven, was flushed and his mouth was

open as he shouted formlessly. The big bay, veteran that he was, braced himself and Galen Kitridge, leaning forward, saber extended met the splashing charge. He was weary, tired as his horse was tired, and the oncoming man and horse were fresh; but four years of war had hardened Kitridge.

Deflecting the saber of the charging man with his own weapon he heard the steel rasp harmlessly along his blade and felt the shock as it struck the guard. The bay staggered as he met the opposing horse's shoulder and for an instant Kitridge and the young lieutenant were face to face, their sabers locked and lifted above them. Then with a wrench and twist Kitridge freed his saber, swung clear, and brought his weapon down, sweeping toward the blue shoulder just where it joined the collar.

For some reason, through some inner instinct, for a man does not think coldly in a fight, at the last instant he turned the blade. It was not the edge but the flat of the saber that struck against neck and shoulder. The lieutenant's horse, slipping on the round stones of the ford, staggered and fell and Kitridge caught a glimpse of desperate blue eyes and tortured face as the man went down. Then Marshal had swung again and was splashing on toward the further bank where Dad Summers and Bert Loy were guarding his retreat, the Sharps roaring and the Spencer crackling spitefully.

Next they were in the lane, the mud churning under the sliding feet of their horses.

"Fifteen or twenty of 'em," Summers bellowed. "They'd of got us if we hadn't drapped them horses in the ford. Wheah now, Majah?"

BELOW the ford the lane angled sharply. The pursuit had not yet cleared the ford. There was a moment's grace and in that moment Kitridge made his decision. He kept Marshal straight along the lane and, at the rail fence that barred the end, lifted the weary horse. Marshal's hind feet clicked against the top rail in the leap; he staggered as he came down and then, recovering, galloped on across the field. Looking back Kitridge could see that Summers and Loy were a length behind

him. They, too, had cleared the fence. Trees, a growth of hickory interspersed with walnut, were immediately ahead and, turning Marshal a trifle, Kitridge rode to meet them.

Within the trees, screened by them, he slowed. He could hear Summers' horse blowing hard, could hear the whistling of breath through Marshal's own nostrils. Summers came up, flanked by Loy, and Kitridge stopped.

"We made it cleah," Summers announced. "They stopped fo' that young fello' yo' cut down, Majah. Why fo' did yo' let him go? Yo' had a cleah stroke at his haid."

"I don't know," Kitridge answered and then, looking at Loy, "You're hit, Loy."

"Just a scratch Majah," Loy answered. "What now, suh?"

"We'll push on through the timber," Kitridge decided. "We'll have to wait till dark now. They'll be watching all the roads."

"That ain't no scratch yo' got, Bert," Summers said sharply. "That theah's a wound."

"Push back through the trees and see what they're doing," Kitridge ordered sharply. "I'll look at Loy."

Summers rode off through the timber, and Kitridge, dismounting, helped Loy out of the saddle.

Loy had been hit, hard and high in the side. The bullet had plowed a furrow under his arm and when Kitridge touched the wound Loy flinched. "Broke a rib I reckon," he hazarded. "I'm all right, Majah. I can ride."

Kitridge frowned. Loy could ride, perhaps, but not far. Summers came back through the trees, the rain spattering down from the wet leaves overhead.

"Went down the lane," he reported. "Reckon they thought we'uns had followed the road."

"We'll have to get Loy in and tie up that wound," Kitridge announced, wadding his handkerchief against the red gash and pulling Loy's coat back over it. "Keep your coat buttoned, Loy. It will compress the wound. We'll get to a place where we can bandage it right."

"Beckwith's?" Loy asked tentatively and turned his eyes from Kitridge's face.

There was a pause in which the rain fell

slowly and then Kittridge answered. "Beckwith's. Come, I'll help you mount."

He aided Loy into the saddle, swung up on Marshal and gave an order. "Go on. You know the way, Loy." Loy started on, Dad Summers falling in beside him. Major Galen Kittridge rode behind. Far back and to the right there was a rattle of shots and then stillness and Summers said: "Thought they'd saw us."

Kittridge made no answer. He was staring past his men, looking at the blank wall of timber, seeing, in his mind, what lay beyond.

"Yo' doin' all right, boy?" Summers asked of Bert Loy. "Yo' makin' it?"

"All right," Loy answered gruffly. "But the damn thing hurts."

Clear of the timber they saw the rolling country stretch ahead. There was nothing in the country, no animals, no cattle or horses—only the good bluegrass, wet with the rain. Fields, once fertile, were choked now with weeds. The brush grew thick along the edge of the timber, and in the corners of the rail fences brush had sprung up. The three went across the fields.

Where fences interposed Dad Summers dismounted and let down the rails. He would have replaced these, did replace them at the first fence. After that he let them go. What was the use of fencing vacant land? Beyond the last rail fence a stone wall, high and carrying traces of whitewash, flanked a lane. They rode along the length of stone and, turning through an opening, entered a yard.

"We'll go back to the quarters," Galen Kittridge said, "not to the house, Loy."

"Yes, suh," Loy's voice was hoarse.

HERE was a kind of stone barracks behind the big stone house. A wildly tangled garden grew in between the house and barracks, a wealth of brown dead plants mingling with the green, new bushes. Beyond the barracks a stable, magnificent in size and ruinous in appearance, lay gaping in the rain. The men stopped their horses. As they dismounted, Summers solicitously aiding Loy, a man, neither young nor old but black as charcoal, came from the door of one of the stone cubicles and approached them. The negro stopped short when he saw Galen Kittridge, his mouth opening

with his astonishment. Kittridge said: "Hello, Dave."

"Mr. Kittridge!" Dave exclaimed. "We'd head'd that you was killed, suh. Miss Zoe is at the big house. I'll go . . ."

"No," Kittridge shook his head. "We won't disturb Miss Zoe, Dave. Is Nancy still here?"

"Yes suh," Dave grinned whitely all across his face. "Nancy's heah. Nancy an' me married."

Kittridge smiled his congratulations. "That's fine," he said. "Bert Loy—you remember Loy, Dave—has got a hole in him. If you could get Nancy to bring some lint and some bandage, and some hot water?"

"Yas suh!" Dave moved toward the back of the great stone house. "Right away, Mr. Kittridge."

"Things ain't changed so much around here, Majah," Loy commented when Dave had gone. "Seems like it was just the same."

Kittridge shook his head. He was looking at the tangled garden, at the gaping stable, at the paddock fences, broken and in disrepair. "Not the same, Bert," he answered.

Dave was returning from the big house. Nancy, Dave said, would be right along. She'd be there in just a shake. In the meantime. . . . Dave produced a flask and glasses . . . he had taken the liberty of bringing down a little whisky. Would Mr. Kittridge like some whisky?

Kittridge took a drink and passed the bottle on to Dad Summers. That veteran savored the smoothness of the whisky on his tongue and spoke a warning to Bert Loy. "You take a li'l' drink, Bert. That lickuh is smooth as silk an' hot as hell's own se'f. Don't take much. She'll start yo' wound to pumpin'."

Loy took a little drink. From the back door of the Big House a woman came hurrying, a basin in one hand, the other filled with cloths. This was Nancy, neat, young, smiling when she saw Galen Kittridge. "Suah good to see you, Mr. Galen," she greeted. "I brought the cloths. Heah's the hot water."

Under the dripping shelter of the barrack eaves Kittridge accepted the bandages and the basin, and thanked their bearer.

"I got to hurry right back," Nancy in-

formed. "Miss Zoe's prob'ly needin' me."

She turned and was gone along the weed grown gravel of the path. Summers began the careful removal of Loy's coat, and Kitridge, tearing a piece from the cloth Nancy had brought, dipped it in the basin.

"Miss Rachel's awful sick," Dave informed, advancing to the officer's side. "Lemme hold that fo' you, suh."

"Sick?" Kitridge asked, sponging the wound in Loy's side that now was laid bare.

"Out of her haid, suh," Dave explained. "She's . . . kind of crazy, Mr. Kitridge."

The wound was clean and Kitridge looked sharply at Loy. "Sure some of that bullet didn't split off and go inside?" he asked.

Stolidly, Loy shook his head. "Just cut me along the ribs," he assured.

"Miss Zoe . . . she's a havin' a worl' of trouble," Dave said softly. "She don' see Mr. Fernald no mo'. Bad times, Mr. Kitridge."

Kitridge appeared not to hear the negro's words. He was padding the wound, wrapping bandage tightly about Loy's torso. "I've got to hold this some way," he decided, finishing the wrapping.

"Tie it," Dad Summers grunted. "Make a knot . . . heah, lemme." His brown fingers supplanted Kitridge's own. He knotted the bandage firmly. "Guess yo' can put yoah shirt on, Bert," he said, completing the task. "I'll he'p yo'."

"Miss Zoe's comin'," Dave warned.

Moving through the rain, graceful as any rain-grown plant bent by a little wind, a woman advanced down the gravel path. Galen Kitridge, extending his arm, braced himself against the stone wall of the barracks and watched her. Within the shelter of the deep eaves the woman stopped and, lifting her head, looked full at the tall officer.

SHE was not a beautiful woman. There was too much character written in her face for beauty to predominate. Wide, full lips gave a promise of generosity, and the clear brown eyes that met Galen Kitridge's gray gaze were deep and limpid pools. For a long instant those brown eyes searched the major's face and then the woman smiled. "You are welcome here, Galen," she said and her voice thrilled the man.

"You knew that you were welcome. Why did you stop here? Why didn't you come to the house?"

"I had a wounded man," Kitridge said with uncertainty. "I . . . I was not sure, Zoe. Before I left. . . .

"I was angry when you left," Zoe interposed hastily. "That was a long time ago, Galen."

"A long time," Kitridge agreed.

"Will you come now?" The woman half extended her hand. "I need help, Galen."

"I'll look after the hawses, Majah," Dad Summers interposed. "We got to stay someplace till it's dark."

Loy, seated on a bench beneath the eaves, had not moved since Summers had helped him back into his shirt and coat.

"Won't you come, Galen?" the woman said again. Without a look at Summers or Loy, Galen Kitridge stepped out from beneath the eaves. The two, man and woman, walked along the gravel side by side, neither noticing the rain. Dad Summers watched them go and, when they had disappeared into the house, stood motionless and silent for a long moment. Then, turning, he spoke abruptly to the negro who stood by.

"Yere, boy. Wheah at can I stable these hawses?"

"I'll take the hawses," Dave answered and, moving forward, possessed himself of the reins of the three mounts and led them away toward the stable.

From the bench Loy's voice came hoarsely. "That's the way it ought to of been in the fust place. Just that-a-way."

"What way?" Summers demanded, wheeling.

Loy waved the arm of his uninjured side toward the house. "Them two," he answered. "That-a-way. Togetheh."

Dad Summers sat down on the bench beside his wounded companion. Producing a twist of tobacco from his pocket he worried off a chew and mastering it spat brownly into the rain. "Go on now, Bert," Summers commanded. "Tell me."

Loy rocked a little, shifting his body gently. "I come from around heah," he said slowly. "I knowed the majah all my life."

Summers chewed tobacco and spat.

"Quality folks," Loy said. "Majah an' Miss Zoe. He loved her, I reckon."

"So?" Dad Summers interjected.

"We'uns allus figgered they'd be married," Loy continued slowly. "Everybody up an' down the valley figgered that-a-way. Then theah was some trouble an' Miss Zoe she married Murry Fernald."

Dad's thick shoulders humped and he stopped chewing. "That theah scoundrel that was drummed outen Jackson's corps?" he demanded incredulously.

"That un," Loy growled the words. His ordinarily smooth forehead was furrowed in a scowl and there were little murderous glints in his eyes.

Summers chewed ruminantly. "Majah sat on his co't martial," he said. "He was drummed outen the army for cowardice. Why fo' did yo' try to kill him, Bert? Accounten the majah?"

Loy shook his head. "Not jest that," he answered. "I got a long tally to pay Murry Fernald."

"As how?" Old Dad pried into Loy. "Yo' sure tried to kill him that one time. Wasn't fo' me they'd of hung yo' high fo' killin' him."

"Damn his soul!" Loy swore. "I had a cousin, secon' cousin she was, lived down by Little Piney. Murry Fernald got to ridin' that-a-way. My cousin she brung a woods colt. Kilt herself after that. Murry Fernald was the baby's daddy."

"Uh," Dad Summers said and lapsed into silence.

"He needed killin'," Loy said sullenly. "You didn't do me no favah when you pushed my gun outen line that time."

"The majah didn't want to go to the house, did he?" Summers asked, changing the tempo of the talk. "Kind of pulled back."

Loy nodded. "Mought be hard to see the gal you liked married to anothah man," he suggested.

Dad rid himself of his chew. "An' that's why the majah nevah did give a good damn," he soliloquized. "Always acted like he didn't care. Always tried to throw himse'f away, the majah did. That's the reason, I reckon." He nodded toward the house.

"Heah comes Dave," Loy warned.

Dad paid no attention to the warning. "Wimmin," he growled. "Always raisin' hell with some man. Mighty fine thing her turnin' down the majah an' marryin'

a skunk like that Fernald. Wheah at did you put them hawses, boy?"

"In the stable," Dave answered, coming up. "I fed 'em. Theah ain't much feed."

Dad Summers reached back and possessed himself of the Sharps Berdan where it leaned against the wall. "I'll scout around a little," he announced. "I kind of want to look it ovah anyhow." The rifle dangling from his hand, he stepped out into the rain.

"I need anothah li'l' drink of that whisky, Dave," Loy said. "An you mought bring down a bit of food."

WHEN they stepped into the entrance of the big stone house Galen Kitridge stopped abruptly. Zoe Fernald took two steps and turned before she also halted. Once more the man and woman confronted each other, the eyes of each searching the other's face. "I am sorry, Zoe," Kitridge said at length, his scrutiny finished. "I'm riding north with dispatches. We had a brush with a Union patrol at the ford and Bert Loy was wounded. This was the nearest place. We'll go on presently." His voice had stiffened as he spoke, become constrained.

"You are welcome," Zoe said. "There is no need for apology, Galen."

"You said that you needed help," Kitridge reminded. "If there is anything I can do . . ."

"Mother Fernald," Zoe said. "She's . . . is dying, Galen."

Kitridge stiffened. His face was pale tan marble, all the color drained from beneath the weathered skin. Zoe watched him, almost speculatively. "She is calling for Murry," the girl said softly.

"I'm sorry," Kitridge's voice was stiff. "I have no knowledge of Mr. Fernald. Some time ago. . . ."

"I know," the girl said, and flushed. "Murry was drummed out of the army, condemned as a coward. I had a letter. . . ."

"I was assigned to his court," Kitridge interrupted. "A duty that I could not shirk, no matter how distasteful it was. The evidence was very plain, very positive. I . . ."

Zoe Fernald took the two steps that separated them, and placed her hand on Kitridge's sleeve. "I know that it was

your plea that kept the court from condemning Murry to death," she said. "Why did you make that argument, Galen?"

Kittridge flushed hotly. "I . . ." he began.

"It was on my account," the girl said. "You still love me, Galen."

Kittridge's gray eyes could no longer meet Zoe's. He shifted nervously. Zoe spoke again. "Murry lied to me," she said. "He told me that you were in the tavern and that my name was bandied about there and that you did not resent it. There were othes who said that it was true. I know now that they lied. I'm sorry for the injustice I did you."

"You know that he lied?" Kittridge's voice was hot. "You know . . .?"

"We all make mistakes," the woman said. "I made a mistake because I believed a lie. Your mistake was in your pride. You did not come back after we quarreled."

"You ordered me to leave," Kittridge reminded thickly. "You . . ."

"And I was wrong," the girl interposed. "I have apologized."

Galen Kittridge looked away again. "I can help you in your difficulty?" he asked, controlling his voice.

"You can help an old woman," Zoe corrected softly. "She is calling for Murry. She is almost blind, Galen, and since the word came concerning Murry's court martial she has been. . . . She has gone back to the time before the War, when there was peace here in the valley."

"What do you want me to do?" Galen Kittridge questioned hoarsely.

"I want you to go to her," Zoe answered, each word deliberate. "I want you to bend down and kiss her and tell her that you are Murry and that you have come home. I want her to die happy."

Kittridge's hands were knotted fists. Under his dark mustache his lips were compressed until they were bloodless as he sought for control and did not find it. "Why have you stayed here?" he burst out. "Why did you marry Fernald? Why haven't you left him? You know. . . ."

"Pride, Galen," Zoe Fernald said. "Pride and then. . . . I love Mother Fernald. We have our little loyalties, Galen. Even I have them."

Kittridge turned away, paced the length of the short hall, paced back and, halting,

looked at the woman once more. "Where is she?" he asked levelly. "Will she recognize me? Are you sure that this is what should be done?"

Zoe's voice was eager. "She won't know that you aren't Murry. Speak softly to her, tell her that you have come home. Don't mention the war, don't say anything but that you are at home and that you will stay with her. You can make her happy, Galen."

Galen Kittridge groaned. Then, squaring his shoulders as for an ordeal, he asked a question. "Where is she?"

"I'll take you," Zoe Fernald said. "Come!"

THEY passed through the old, familiar rooms. Ascending the great stairs, his hand caressing the smoothness of the bannister, Kittridge paused, hesitating. Ahead of him Zoe continued to climb and, after that instant's hesitation, he followed her.

At the top of the stairs Zoe flashed him a warning glance and then led the way into a room, dim in the light that filtered through curtained windows. Nancy, the negro woman stood up beside a bed, and crossing to the bed Zoe bent down and spoke, her voice cheerful. "I've brought someone to see you, Mother Fernald," she said. "Someone that you want to . . ."

From the bed a weak voice came, lifting up. "Murry! Murry has come home!"

Galen Kittridge crossed to the bed and stood beside it. The woman on the bed, the coverings outlining her emaciation, stared up at him with wide, almost sightless eyes. One thin hand moved feebly and Galen possessed himself of it. "I've come home," he said, his voice low. "I've come back, Mother," and, bending down, he kissed the thin cheek.

The woman on the bed was silent, tears welling to the wide, dim eyes. The other feeble hand trembled as it rested in Galen's clasp. For a moment they remained so, a tragic tableau. Then Rachel Fernald, on the bed, spoke.

"I've wanted you so, Murry. I've wanted you to come back to Zoe."

The deception had succeeded. Zoe Fernald, looking at Galen Kittridge's face could not fathom his expression. Her own eyes were wet. On the bed the woman spoke again. "I can go now, Murry! I've been

waiting for you to come back. Zoe has been good, so good. . . ." The voice trailed away. The feeble hands clung to Galen's strong grasp.

"I'll stay now," Kittridge promised, sensing the words that would make the woman happy. "I'll stay."

"Murry," Rachel Fernald murmured. "Murry . . ."

Her eyes closed. The feeble hands relaxed their grasp. Galen Kittridge looked at Zoe and his lips formed a question. "Is she . . .?"

Zoe shook her head. "Resting," she whispered. "Asleep perhaps. Nancy will stay with her."

She moved from the bed. Gently Kittridge detached his hand and followed her. At the doorway he paused and looked back. The negro woman was standing beside the bed, watching its occupant. Kittridge stepped out into the hall.

In the hall Zoe faced him. Her eyes were bright with some emotion that he could not read. "Thank you," she said simply. "You have made her very happy."

Kittridge moved toward the stairs, passing the woman. "I've got to go," he said, his voice husky. "I . . ."

Below the stairs there was sound of confusion. Looking down Kittridge saw the negro, Dave, reach the bottom of the flight and start an ascent. Dave, seeing the man at the landing, halted and spoke quickly. "Yo' men want you, Mr. Kittridge. They got a man outside. They want you right quick!"

Without a glance toward Zoe, Kittridge ran down the stairs.

Outside, in front of the quarters, Dad Summers was standing, his Sharps lowered, leveled at his hip; and, menaced by the Sharps, another man stood leaning nonchalantly against the wall of the quarters. Loy was in the doorway of one of the cubicles and Loy, too, held his rifle. With a start Kittridge recognized the lounging man and hastened through the falling rain toward the group.

"Found him slippin' around, Majah," Summers announced sharply. "Spyin' around. I brung him in."

"You'd hardly call it spying for a man to come to his own home," the man drawled. "Call off your dogs, Kittridge."

"What are you doing around here, Fer-

nald?" Galen Kittridge demanded sternly.

"Majah!" Loy's voice was hoarse, "lemme have him. Lemme alone with him a minute."

Kittridge turned toward Loy. Loy's face was livid, his usually stolid features distorted. "Why . . ." Kittridge began.

"I got a reckonin' with him," Loy burst out. "All I want . . ." The Spencer clicked sharply as Loy cocked it. He took a half step forward. "In yo' belly," he growled at Fernald. "That's wheah I'll shoot you. In the belly an' then I'll watch you kick."

Fernald had straightened from his careless slouch. His face had gone white. "Will you let him murder me, Kittridge?" he demanded.

"What is this?" Kittridge demanded, staring at Loy. "Put down that gun, Loy!"

LOY did not lower the weapon. "Yo' remember Rosalie?" he snarled at Fernald. "Yo' remember the gal you ruint down along the Piney? Mebbe yo'll remember her when you got the bullets in yo' belly, yo' damned . . ." The Spencer raised. Loy had the gun's butt at his shoulder. Dad Summers did not move. In Dad's code retribution was retribution, and just. Kittridge took a long step, seized Loy's weapon and twisted it down.

"No!" he ordered. "Drop it, Loy!"

"I ain't a goin' to drop it," Loy struggled for the weapon, tried to twist it from Kittridge's hand.

"Stop him!" There was sheer panic in Fernald's voice. "Stop him, Kittridge. Remember Zoe. I'm her husband. . . ."

Kittridge had the Spencer now. Loy was standing panting, the color gone from his face. "Drop it, I told you," Kittridge rasped at the man. "Are you crazy, Loy?"

Gradually sanity returned to Loy's eyes. "I reckon I was, Majah," he answered, the words barely audible. "I reckon so. Excuse me, suh."

Still holding the Spencer, Kittridge turned to Fernald. "Now," he grated, "what are you doing here?"

The danger past, Fernald had regained a measure of composure, but the color had not yet returned to his face.

"Surely a man has a right to come to his own home, Major Kittridge," he answered. "You'll remember that the Beck-

with Place came to me with my marriage. I might ask you what you are doing here? And I *will* say that you are not welcome."

Kittridge lowered the Spencer. His face was as white as had been Fernald's own. He realized, suddenly, that what Fernald said was true, that this was the Beckwith place and that Murry Fernald was the master here. Fernald seized the advantage.

"It's evident," he sneered, "that you have been visiting. When the cat's away the mice will play, is that it?"

The implication in the words was plain. There was hell behind Galen Kittridge's eyes as he gazed at the man. Fernald recoiled from that stare. For an instant Galen Kittridge stood there motionless, and then he choked out a command. "Get out! Get out before I kill you."

Fernald smiled, tantalizing and taunting. He had the whip hand and he knew it. He was safe from Galen Kittridge, safe because of Zoe. "Doubtless my wife is waiting for me," he drawled. "I'll see." Deliberately he turned his back and strolled through the rain along the weed grown gravel of the path. Kittridge watched him go, hands tightly gripping the Spencer. Reaching the house, Fernald turned, smiled, and jauntily mounted the steps.

"Get the horses!" Kittridge choked. "Go on!"

Dad Summers shrugged and glanced helplessly toward Loy. Loy was chewing stolidly, his eyes fixed on the major's face.

"Well . . . Hell!" Dad Summers said and walked toward the barn.

When he came back, leading the three horses, he found his companions ready to depart. Cinches were tightened, Loy was helped into the saddle and Summers stuffed food into his saddle bags. Dave stood beside the rock barracks, his face anxious. Kittridge swung up on Marshal, spoke rapidly to the negro.

"Please thank Miss Zoe for the shelter and hospitality," he said. "We're grateful to you and Nancy, too. Good-bye, Dave."

"Good-bye, Mr. Kittridge," Dave answered.

Marshal moved ahead. Wearily Summers and Loy fell into place behind their officer. Out through the yard they went, into the lane. Down the lane a hundred

yards and Kittridge turned right through a gap in the fence.

"All over the country," Summers mourned. "Theah's blue coats . . ."

"The major knows this country better'n any blue jacket," Loy interrupted. "We ain't so far from Richmond, Dad. We got to get through."

"Couple of hours ain't goin' to make any difference," Summers complained. "We'd ought to wait till dark."

Kittridge turned in his saddle. His lean face was masklike, hard and uncompromising.

"You say that the Federals are out in force?" he asked.

"All over," Dad Summers waved a comprehensive hand.

"Then they're moving in on Richmond," Kittridge said. "We'll scout as we go. We'll cross the river at Breathits, swing west, and come in from that direction. It's our duty."

"It's that damned gal that set us moving," Dad Summers mumbled in his beard. "Well, hell, we mought as well git killed now as in Richmond!"

Bert Loy said nothing. His eyes were fixed steadfastly on Kittridge's back.

THE three rode warily across the fields. Twice, as they approached lanes, Kittridge halted his companions and rode ahead to scout. Once he returned and they waited impatiently for a Federal patrol to pass, chewing the cold food that Dave had provided and Summers brought along. Once they hid in the underbrush and, twenty yards from them, Federal cavalrymen dripped in the rain and conversed in the broad dialect of Iowa. The rain thinned to a drizzle, dusk came down and, with dusk, they reached the river.

Here again Summers and Loy waited. Loy's eyes were unnaturally bright and his cheeks were red with the fever mounting in his body. Summers, seeing the signs, was anxious but held his peace. This was wartime and a man did not stop because a fellow was wounded. Kittridge rejoined his companions, riding back through the drizzling dusk and spoke quietly. "There's a detachment at the river," he informed. "A sergeant and ten men. They've built a fire. We'll cross above them."

"Loy's not feelin' so good, Majah," Summers said.

"I'm all right," Loy stated.

Kitridge looked at the man, noted his bright eyes and flushed cheeks. "This whole country is alive with Union cavalry," he announced. "This is our only chance to get through."

"I can go," Loy said stolidly.

"You reckon Lee's movin'?" Dad Summers queried. "You reckon he's pullin' out of Richmond? Why else would the Federals be stirred up like this? They wasn't in heah when we come south. Shorely they wouldn't be all riled up about jus' three men tryin' to cross a ford."

Kitridge looked sharply at the older man. So far, since leaving Beckwith's, his actions, his whole thinking had been almost automatic. Seeing Zoe Beckwith, Zoe Fernald now, had been a shock, a thing that he had sought to avoid. He loved the woman, had never forgotten her, although in the activity of campaigning, in the battles he had fought, in the long rides and forced marches, he had tried to forget her, sought to lose in action, his pain at her loss.

Now he knew that it had all been useless, as useless as had been his attempts to consider Murry Fernald fairly and impartially. It had been his plea, impassioned and fiery, that had changed the sentence of Fernald's court-martial from death to dishonorable discharge and drumming from the Army. He had made that plea for Zoe. He knew it now, knew that it had been Zoe he had pleaded for, not Murry Fernald.

And now Old Dad Summers, drawling Old Dad who had fought Indians all across the West, who had trapped and hunted, who, since '61 had been his satellite, his almost constant companion, had spoken of what was happening in the country between the Roanoke and the James and had recalled to Galen Kitridge the fact that he was a Confederate officer, that personal things must stand aside, out of the light of these greater affairs.

"You think General Lee is moving?" he asked.

"Somethin's movin'," Dad said simply. "Weuns is yere an' the's somethin' stirrin'."

"And we must find out what it is if we

can," Kitridge said sharply. "We'll cross the river just at dark."

Dad nodded his satisfaction. "An' scout," he amplified. "Mebbe we mought have some news for Lee."

"We'll cross the river," Kitridge said again.

"How about this yere ford?" Dad puckered his eyes and peered through the growing dusk. "They's a patrol at it?"

"At the crossing below Breathit's, yes," Kitridge agreed. "There's another crossing up above."

"I never heahed of no crossin' upstream," Loy vouchsafed. "Theah's the Co'thousie Crossin' an' the Breathit Crossin' but that's all I evah heahed about."

"Zoe Beckwith and I found this one," Kitridge explained. "We were riding . . ." He stopped abruptly. Why explain to these two how he had come to find the crossing? Why torture his mind with the remembrance of that summer day when he and Zoe, riding side by side, had gone across the fields and, laughing, daring each other, had jumped their horses into the river only to find that they had come upon a gravelly bar, and a hidden ford. "It's there," he said with finality.

"We been moseyin' along," Summers announced. "We taken our time up to now. We mought get us a wiggle on."

"I'll show you," Kitridge said. "Come on."

LEAVING the timber that sheltered them, they crossed a muddy road. Beyond the road, across a stone fence, they struck into timber again, open forest this and not so dense as that through which they had passed. Now the ground sloped away, for they were dropping into the river bottom.

"Goin' to be dark before we make it," Dad Summers prophesied. "We cain't cross no rivah in the dark."

"No," Kitridge answered. "We're almost there. We . . . Halt!" The last word was low and fierce. Through the low brush ahead something moved. Summers cocked the big Sharps and Kitridge reached for the holstered Colt and then remembered that it was useless. "Watch, Summers," he ordered. "When you have the chance . . ."

"Galen!" The call came low and clear,

floating through the drizzling rain.
"Galen!"

"My God!" Galen Kittridge exclaimed.
"It's Zoe!"

Summers lowered the Sharps. Kittridge rode forward. The dim figure, mounted, came toward them. Summers saw the two meet, and glanced meaningly at Loy. Loy was staring far away, as though he would not witness that meeting. "Damned wimmen!" Dad Summers murmured. "You reckon . . ."

Zoe Fernald's voice carried, low and tense to their ears. "Lee is moving," the girl said. "Going west. Richmond has surrendered."

"How do you know?" Kittridge's voice was a harsh rasp.

"I know," the girl said. "He can't strike south. There is a cavalry screen below the James. He must go west to Appomattox."

"How do you know?" again Kittridge rasped the question.

"Murry," Zoe said simply. "There were a lot of men that came after you had gone, Galen. Deserters from both armies. Murry is with them. He is one of their leaders. I heard them talking. I slipped away. I knew that you would come here and that your horses were tired and that you would have to hide. I thought that I could find you at our secret crossing."

"But . . ."

"There was no need for me to stay," Zoe said slowly. "Mother Fernald is gone. She died before Murry came. She had been waiting, just waiting, and when you spoke to her you freed her. She was happy when she died."

There was silence for a moment. The big bay horse that Zoe bestrode shifted nervously.

"Suppose you hadn't found me?" Kitridge demanded.

"Then I was going on to find the army," Zoe answered. "They don't often stop a woman. I passed two patrols on the way here. There is a cavalry regiment across the river and they have thrown out patrols toward the south. The crossings are guarded. I thought . . ."

"We'll get to Lee," Kitridge rasped. "You go back, Zoe, and . . ."

"I'll never go back;" Zoe Fernald said quietly. "I go with you, Galen."

"With me?" The astonishment rang in Kittridge's voice.

"I should have always been with you," Zoe said and then, disregarding Summers, disregarding the silent Loy: "I love you, Galen. It was pride that . . ." She said no more. Galen Kittridge had bent in his saddle. His arms, sweeping out, gathered the woman from her mount and held her close against his breast. Loy turned away and Dad Summers, kicking his weary horse forward, reached out and possessed himself of the reins the girl had released. Dad's jaws moved rhythmically although there was no tobacco in them.

"Damned wimmen!" Dad murmured.

He waited, staring through the brush toward the river, watching the brush grow dim, watching the river bank disappear into the darkness. And then, in time, he spoke. "Gettin' dark, Majah," old Dad Summers said.

"We'll go on." There was a ring in Galen Kittridge's tone that Dad had never heard before. It was as though Kittridge had suddenly found life, as though heretofore he had been dead.

"I'll he'p the lady mount," Summers offered and swung down, holding the Sharps carefully.

THEY splashed across the ford. There was no uncertainty in their leadership, for Zoe marked the way. She seemed to know just where the gravelly bar twisted sharply upstream, seemed to sense the deep channel, leading almost as though there were full daylight to aid her.

"I've come here often," she announced, when they had gained the further side. "I . . . it was a secret between us, Galen, remember?"

The rain had stopped now and the wind soughed through the dripping trees. The river bottom afforded shelter but when they left that shelter the wind would be cold. This was early April and Kitridge shivered.

"We must work north," he said. "We can reach Lynchburg. From there we can get word to Lee. We . . ."

"We cain't go much furthah," Dad Summers said flatly, out of the gloom. "Bert, he's about done an' these hawses ain't what you'd call fresh."

"My horse. . . ." Zoe began.

"Ma'am," Dad interrupted, "yo' hawse is one thing an' these hawses we got is anothah. We've come a right fur piece."

In his mind Galen Kitridge computed distances and time against horseflesh. "Dad's right," he said. "We can't go much farther without rest."

"Iffen I knowed wheah the' was a outpost," Dad said, "I mought steal us some hawses. I been with the Comanches an' they're right smart hawse thieves. I. . . ."

"We'll push on out of here," Kitridge decided. "Where can we go, Zoe?"

"The old Packer place?" Zoe answered, questioningly. "You remember where the old summer house was?"

"Yes, that's it," Kitridge exclaimed. "We can rest there. Zoe, I. . . ."

The rest of the words were lost. Dad Summers, pushing close to Loy, growled gruffly: "Wheah at's this place? We'uns mought. . . . " He stopped short. Loy reeled in his saddle. Only Dad's sustaining arm kept him from falling.

"Majah!" Dad said sharply. "We cain't go no furthah. Loy's done."

"I can go," Loy said weakly. "I ain't done yet."

With Zoe leading the way, Summers and Kitridge flanking their wounded companion, the little party made their splashy progress. Leaving the river bottom, they pushed along through sparse timber and struck a grass grown lane. "Field road," Kitridge said. "Packer hauled cotton over this."

Summers grunted. "How much furthah?"

"Just a little way now. Just a quarter."

"The sooner the quicker," Summers said.

They left the grassy road, going through a gap in a fence. The wind had whipped away the clouds, and watery stars flickered in the sky. Against the east the gaunt skeleton of a house, only the chimneys and three great stone pillars left of its former magnificence, shown darkly against the sky.

"They burned the Packer place," Zoe said softly. "They. . . ." Her words broke and she screamed, once, shrill and terrified. From the dark ground life sprang up all about them. Dusky figures moving swiftly, snatched at bridle reins; hands clutched at stirrups and legs. Galen Kitridge reached for his saber, rasped it

from the scabbard and struck one well aimed blow. Then he was pulled down into a tangle of flying arms and legs. The saber was wrenched away, the sword knot broken. He could hear Dad Summers grunt as he struck with the Sharps, could hear men scream under the pain of those blows. He fought up, struggling against the weight that pressed him down, gained his feet and stood, wide-legged for an instant. Then something crashed against his head and he went down again, the whole world blotted out in blackness.

THE regular thumping of his head was the mark of Galen Kitridge's returning consciousness. He opened his eyes a trifle, and through the slits he saw a dancing light above him. At first he thought that this was imaginary; then, as the thumping continued and the light kept on its flickering, he knew that it was reflected firelight he saw. This was not the first time that Major Kitridge had lain on his back and felt his heartbeats in his head. There was a long white scar along his jaw, memory of Shiloh, and there was a piece of lead deeply imbedded in his shoulder muscles that he had carried away from Chancellorsville. Both wounds had laid him low, and after the saber wound he had spent three long weeks in the hospital. He lay quiet and waited. Gradually opening his eyes a little wider, he saw that it was limestone that reflected the firelight and, the ache in his head forgotten, immediately knew where he was. This was the Packer's summer home, in reality a cave beneath a limestone cliff that Selah Packer had made into a picnic ground. Beneath this very rock Galen Kitridge had dined, had laughed merrily with Zoe beside him, had, where the shadows fell, held her hand and felt a returning pressure to his grip. Turning his head a trifle he could see the source of the light, a fire burning in the big stone fireplace that Packer had caused to be made. A man passed between him and the fire carrying some burden, and now Kitridge, fully cognizant of his surroundings, saw other men, some standing, some reclining, and all near the fire. The drone of voices reached him and he struggled to a sitting position.

The fire was big. There were fifteen or twenty men close by it. Beside Galen

Kittridge, Dad Summers was stretched prone and, beyond Summers, Bert Loy was huddled in an inert bundle as though someone had carried him in and dumped him down. Zoe was nowhere to be seen. Before he could gain his feet, weak as he was, a man came from the gloom of the overhang and stood beside him. "Hey, Butch," the man called. "This'uns come to life."

From beside the fire a great bodied, gross, bearded man came cumberously to his feet. Passing across the opening he kicked at the legs of a man that barred his path. That one pulled his legs away with an oath but made no effort to retaliate. The bearded man, bear-like in his movements, came on and stood looking down at Galen. "You ain't dead then," he said, his voice curiously clipped and nasal. "You'll wisht to heaven you was after a while."

The bearded man wore a soiled Federal uniform, some of the buttons were missing from the coat, the belt bulged, and a dirty shirt, exposed by the opened coat, followed the bulge. He looked speculatively at Kittridge. Behind the bearded man and to his right there was movement; and then Murry Fernald spoke, his voice thin and sarcastic.

"Major Kittridge, I believe. Allow me. Major Kittridge, Mr. Butch Carver, late of the Third New York Infantry, formerly of the Bowery. You two gentlemen should know each other."

"Cut it out, Fernald," Carver rumbled. "Don't try to be funny. You're a major, ain't you? Where was you goin'?"

Kittridge remained silent and Carver, reaching out with one big foot, stirred the sitting man with his toe. "I axed you a question," he growled.

KITTRIDGE'S eyes had been busy. In the group about the fire he had noted a mixture of Confederate and Union uniforms. That mixture told the tale. This was no group of regularly organized troops; this was a band of deserters, men who had fled from war, from the discipline of both armies and had joined together for mutual profit, for pillage and murder and rapine.

"You asked me a question," he said, looking up coolly at Carver. "I don't choose to answer it."

"Cocky, ain't you?" Carver rumbled. "We can take that out of you."

Kittridge disregarded the big man. His eyes sought Fernald's face. "Where is your wife?" he demanded. "Where is Zoe?"

"So you admit she is my wife?" Fernald seemed to derive amusement from the question. "Gentlemen do not run away with other men's wives. You have always prided yourself on your code of honor, Kittridge. Perhaps you'd care to explain what you were doing with my wife?"

"Where is Zoe?" Kittridge demanded doggedly. "She was with us. What's happened to her, Fernald?"

"Perfectly safe and in the care of her loving husband," Fernald answered, ironically smiling. "That fact should give you a great deal of satisfaction. You see we anticipated you, Major. I knew of the ford above Breathit's. I had followed my wife there on occasion. And when we missed her we struck straight for the crossing. We thought that she would meet you and that you would come here."

"I axed you a question," Carver growled again. "You was tryin' to get to Lee, wasn't you?"

"I was trying to get to Lee," Kittridge answered. There was no use in lying, no use at all.

"Lee ain't goin' to need you." The statement seemed to give Carver a sense of satisfaction. "Lee's pulled out of Richmond. Lee's beat."

"That's a lie!" Kittridge came to his feet. The pounding had subsided in his head, leaving only a dull ache. He stood trembling, confronting Carver. Around the fire the men had risen, forming a more or less compact group. "Lee's not beaten!" Kittridge declared.

Carver's grin split his black beard, showing long yellow teeth. "Game cock, ain't you?" he said. "You don't have to believe me. What was you carryin' to Lee?"

Kittridge closed his lips firmly. He would not answer that.

"Dispatches, that's what," Carver announced triumphantly. "Dispatches from Johnston. I got 'em here." From his side he brought up Kittridge's saddle bags, one opened and the corner of a paper showing at the flap.

"You seem to know," Kittridge said. The

fire was gone from him now, burned away.

"We know, but you're goin' to help us," Carver rasped. "Here it says that Johnston will move and do what Lee wants. There ain't no mention of where he'll go to. We want to know whereabouts he's movin'."

"Why?" Kittridge met the big man's eyes.

"Because we aim to peddle the information to Grant," Carver growled. "Because you know which way Johnston's goin'. The letter says that. It says that you have full information. Where's Johnston goin' to move."

"You can go to hell and find out," Galen Kittridge said levelly.

Carver's big fist lashed out. Kittridge went down, sprawling. Carver's foot thumped against his side, sending pain shooting up along his body. "Damn you!" the big man thundered. "Where's he movin'?"

Kittridge kept his lips firmly shut.

The heavy foot was drawn back for another kick. Carver's face was a mask of ferocity. It was Murry Fernald who interposed. "That's useless, Butch," Fernald drawled. "Can't you see it? He'd die before he'd tell you. But I doubt if he would keep silent under other circumstances. I think I can make him talk."

"Try it then," Carver growled. "Go ahead."

Fernald turned away and Carver stood glowering down at the man on the ground. Kittridge stared up into the bearded face, meeting the man's hot eyes fairly. There was a stir behind Carver, a swift movement and then Zoe was beside him, kneeling, her arms protectively about Kittridge's head.

"What have they done to you?" she wailed. "Galen . . . Galen . . ."

ONCE again Kittridge struggled up until he sat. Zoe's arms supported him. Behind Zoe was Fernald, grinning sardonically. "A touching reunion," he commented. "Now, Kittridge, I'll trouble you for your information. Where is Johnston moving?"

"Don't tell him," Zoe besought. "Don't tell him, Galen. They plan to take the dispatches and information to the Yankee lines. They are selling out to the Yankees."

"My dear," Fernald said gently, "if you knew what was in store for you providing the gentleman doesn't tell, you'd change your tune. Kittridge, I've asked you a question."

"I haven't answered it," Galen said thickly.

The men were gathered all about now, almost blocking out the firelight, standing there, listening intently. Kittridge could see their faces. These were not men but wolves.

"But you will answer," Fernald said gently. "Either tell us what we want to know or you will have the pleasure of seeing Mrs. Fernald consort with these gentlemen." He waved his hand toward the men, so close gathered about. "You have your choice," he concluded.

"You couldn't do that, Fernald!" Kittridge got to his feet. "You couldn't. She's your wife, man! She . . ."

"I assure you that I can and will," Fernald's voice was implacable. Zoe's supporting arms tensed about Kittridge's shoulders. Kittridge looked at the girl and then back to Fernald.

"You aren't a man," he said slowly. "There's no word I can call you." He wheeled suddenly, looking at big Butch Carver. "If you'll give me a saber," he said, eying the big man, "and give him a saber I'll tell you what you want to know."

Carver's little, piggy eyes gleamed. "You mean if I let you fight him you'll tell me?" he demanded.

"Exactly," Kittridge said coldly. "He isn't fit to live. I've bargained with you, Carver."

Carver appeared to think. "I've saw dog fights," he said. "I've saw cockin' mains. I've saw some pretty good man fights. I'll go you, Major. You tell me an' you'll git your saber an' a chance at him."

"And the woman goes free?" Kittridge persisted. "You'll let her go?"

"Hell, you both can go free," Carver announced expansively. "I know your kind, Major. You give me your word that what you tell me is right, an' I'll turn you loose on him. You an' the woman can both go . . . if you win. Gimme your word you'll tell the truth."

"You can't do that, Butch!" There was

fear in Fernald's voice. "I can make him tell. Let me. . . ."

"You're just a damned coward," Carver snarled, thrusting Fernald back with one big arm. "Don't let him git away, boys. Speak out, Major."

"I'll tell you and no one else," Kittridge said. "Here."

He stepped back and, automatically the grouped men made way for him. Carver, lumbering forward, joined Kittridge.

Kittridge leaned close. "Johnston moves west," he said, whispering. "He want's to effect a junction with Lee at Danville."

Carver nodded and straightened. "And now," Kittridge said boldly, "I've told you what you want to know. I want to talk to Zoe. I have your promise that she'll go free?"

"I told you you'd both go, providin' you won," Carver rasped. "You want to talk to her, huh?"

Kittridge nodded. "I must," he said. "I must talk to her alone."

Carver's eyes were shrewd. "You made a bargain," he said slowly. "You ain't goin' to run till you git your chanct at Fernald. All right, I guess you can talk to her."

He turned away from Kittridge, pushing his way among the men. His bellowing voice gave commands. "Draw back. Make a clear place. We're goin' to see a fight. Where's that woman?"

Zoe was thrust forward. There were two men, big fellows, standing behind Fernald. Carver walked toward that pale faced man and, stopping, laughed boisterously. "Git your spurs on, fightin' cock," he belloved. "You'll need 'em."

FREED of the men, Zoe came hastily across the little cleared space to Kittridge. Beside him she stopped and put her hand upon his arm. "Galen . . ." she began. "I . . ."

"There's no time, Zoe," Kittridge warned, low voiced. "I've bargained with Carver. He doesn't mean to keep his promise. You must get away. There will be a chance when we fight. You must get to Lee and tell him that Johnson is moving west. That they are to effect a junction at Danville. You must tell him that Johnston has no supplies and no transport and that he will move slowly, fighting rear guard

actions. Can you remember that, Zoe?"

The girl nodded. "Did you. . . .?" she began.

"I told Carver the truth," Kittridge snapped. "I gave my word. But Carver is the only one that knows and Carver won't live to sell his knowledge. Now, dear, you must be ready. You must take the first chance you have. When the others are watching us you must slip away. I wish that Dad could go with you. If he. . . ." Unconsciously Kittridge's eyes sought the shelter under the overhang where Dad had been. Loy still lay there, a huddled heap, but Dad Summers was gone!

"Dad!" Kittridge exclaimed low voiced. "He's gone!" He's. . . ."

"You ready?" Carver called from beside the fire. "Let's git this finished."

There was time for no more. Galen Kittridge bent forward and kissed Zoe's trembling lips. "Remember," he whispered. "I love you, my dear." He was gone from the girl then, striding out across the open space before the fire. "I'm ready," he said strongly.

"Give him your saber, Charlie," Carver directed. "Git that other one out here. Git 'em lined up, boys."

Fernald was pushed forward. The man held a saber, dangling from his hand. He was pallid, the firelight painting his white face as it flickered. A big man wearing the remnants of a Federal cavalryman's uniform came toward Kittridge. He rasped a saber from the scabbard at his side and held it out. Kittridge took the weapon, balancing it. His eyes were fixed on Fernald.

"Wait till I give the word," Carver ordered. "Wait till I git comfortable, now!" He settled himself beside the fire, stretching out, leaning against a rock. "Now," he grunted. "One . . . two . . . three . . . go!"

Kittridge advanced, saber extended. Before that advance Fernald retreated. The man had half raised his sword, holding it across his body.

Kittridge stopped his advance. Behind Fernald the men closed in, making a living wall. "You damned coward!" Kittridge rasped. "Will you fight?" Fernald's face was ashy. He lowered the saber. Kittridge wheeled to confront Carver.

"Make him fight!" he raged. "Make

him fight! You're a pack of damned cowards. You. . . ."

There was time to say no more. Outside the firelight, where utter darkness reigned, a horse neighed nervously. Silence struck after that shrill sound and then, bursting the silence, clear and distinct and not a hundred feet away, a boyish voice, trembling with eagerness and tension, came shrilly. "You're surrounded. Surrender! Throw down your arms, you. . . ."

The command was not finished. Beside the fire a man jerked out a gun and shot and that single explosion was echoed in a blast of sound.

Kittridge, in amazement, saw men go down. He saw, bursting from the darkness about the fire the familiar blue of Yankee uniforms. With a bellow Carver came to his feet, rasping out the sword he wore. High and shrill above the cacophony came a yell, ear piercing and familiar. Dad Summer's war whoop. All about, men were fighting, and through the melee Carver, Big Butch Carver, the Bowery tough, came swinging the saber he had drawn. Fair and full Kittridge met him, checking the mighty down stroke that the big man launched at his head, turning the steel cunningly with his own blade and instantly retaliating. He had meant that Carver should die when he whispered the information to the big man. It was not in Galen Kittridge's code to lie, he had told Carver the truth, but in demanding Kittridge's word of honor the Bowery tough had signed his own death warrant. There was a fierce joy in Kittridge as he swung into action.

Bruised as he was, still weak from the blow on his head that had felled him, he made the saber a living thing, an extension of his own good right arm.

CARVER was no tyro. An adept at any kind of fighting, after that first fierce encounter he drew back, seeking to lure Kittridge to him. The major came in rapidly, not giving the big man time to perfect his feint. The sabers clanged together, rasped as they were separated, clanged again and then with a lunge Kittridge took his adversary in the shoulder. It was but a pin prick and yet it infuriated Carver. Bellowing, he charged.

Again Kittridge met him, guarding cunningly. Carver slashed at the major's legs to be met by the lower guard and a sharp riposte that almost spitted him. Kittridge was master of the weapon, point and edge were his to command, and now he whirled in to make an end of it.

All about the two the fight raged. Dad Summers was yelling, high and shrill. There were other shouts, grunts as men fought with saber or with clubbed rifles, shrieks of pain when thrusts or blows went home. There were but few shots, the fight was too close, too fierce, too rapid for guns to function. Carver, aiming a mighty blow at Kittridge's head, forced his guarding saber down. He lunged with the blow and, sliding forward, balanced, feet firm on the earth, Kittridge shortened saber and thrust, driving the steel hard into and through the corded neck that lay above Carver's opened shirt.

Carver's eyes turned glassy. Dropping his weapon he staggered back, catching at the saber in his throat with both big hands, wrenching at it, pulling Kittridge along. Then the big man was down and his hands released their hold. Blood gouted from around the saber, drenching it and, with a wrench and twist of his weapon, Kittridge sprang free.

About him the fight had died away. There were bodies on the ground. Yankees, the yellow stripes down their legs showing that they were cavalry, stood panting, some leaning on their weapons, some bending over fallen men, moving in to where a little fight still raged behind the fire. Even as Kittridge turned, that fighting ceased. Compared to the turmoil that had raged but a moment before, the place was quiet. The bloody saber dangling from the sword knot, Galen Kittridge paused. Zoe was hastening toward him from beneath the limestone bluff, and from beside the fire a man came hurrying, a Union officer.

The officer paused and, with a start Galen recognized the man's face. Here was the young lieutenant that he had met in the ford, that he had struck with the flat of his saber. The lieutenant pausing, saluted meticulously and spoke, his voice pleasant. "Major Kittridge, I have the honor of telling you that you are my prisoner. I am very sorry."

"Why . . ." Kittridge said.

A smile broke across the Union officer's face. "I'm Lieutenant Graham, Fourth Ohio Cavalry," he announced. "I owe my life to you, Major, though I can't for the life of me understand why you used the flat in place of the edge this morning. I hope you won't make more unpleasantness necessary."

Dad Summer's drawl was soft in Kitridge's ears. "Give him the saber, Majah. He come in mighty handy a while ago. Let's make it as easy as we can."

STILL in a daze Kitridge extended his weapon. Graham took it. "Thank you," he said. "And now . . . ?"

A big sergeant, striding up, spoke to the officer. With a hasty, "Excuse me, please," Graham turned away. Zoe was beside Kitridge, and Dad Summers, wet and bedraggled and with blood running down his cheek from a cut above his eye and mingling with his beard, grinned up at his officer.

"Better be a Yankée prisoner than to have them devils holdin' us," he said. "Leastwise that's the way I figgered it when I brought 'em heah."

"You brought them?" Kitridge managed. Summers nodded. "I played possum," he said, proudly. "I told Loy to play possum too. Then, when they started in on you I slipped away. I run right into this patrol. They was on the road, restin'. I stuck my finger in a sentry's eah an' tol' him it was a gun an' he believed me. He taken me to the lieutenant an' when I tol' him what was a-goin' on over heah he come a-boilin'. I guided 'em right up close. When Fernald was backin' down from you we was watchin' an' when you turned aroun' the lieutenant hollered to 'em to surrendah. That's when the trouble started. We come just about right, Majah."

"Where is Loy?" Kitridge asked. "He was in the cave. I saw him right beside you, Dad."

Summers peered into the shadow beneath the ledge. "He ain't theah," he said. "I wonder . . . ?"

"And Murry isn't here," Zoe interjected. "I saw him when . . . when you turned Galen Just before the fighting started. I wonder . . . ?"

Lieutenant Graham was returning. Zoe broke off her sentence. "We're through

here," Graham said cheerfully. "There are horses a little way down the creek. A detail is bringing them. Our picket was relieved and we were on the way back to our regiment when your man found us. I'm very glad that we could be of service to you. You saved my life, you know."

Kitridge bowed slightly. "I'm very grateful," he said. "We were in a sorry strait. These bands of deserters. . . ."

Graham frowned. "They're bad," he said. "Frankly, we have lost more by desertion than you people. By the way, Major, why did you do it?"

"Do what?" Kitridge asked.

"Use the flat of your saber in place of the edge," Graham persisted.

Kitridge shook his head. "I don't know," he said slowly. "I suppose because it suddenly seemed to me that there was no use in more killing. I suppose that was it."

"At any rate I'm grateful," Graham announced. "Here are the horses. Now if you will pick your mounts . . . ?"

As though through a haze Kitridge saw Marshal's bay head with the wise eyes and the little star in the forehead. His hand on Zoe's arm he moved toward the horse. Beside him Dad Summers muttered: "Loy's got away."

It was some little time before the Cavalry and the prisoners left the clearing in front of the old summer house. Graham had four wounded men. Six of the deserters were dead and three wounded. The others had vanished into the night. Murry Fernald was not present among the wounded and dead. He was gone with the others.

Galen Kitridge felt a stab of disappointment when he found Fernald gone and yet he could not but know that it was best. There, in the heat of anger, when Fernald had made his declaration and threat concerning Zoe, a fierce desire to kill, a savage determination to obliterate Fernald, had formed in Kitridge. Now, with cold reason supplanting his anger, he knew that, had he carried out his resolution, he might well have separated Zoe from him forever.

Graham was brisk and cheerful as he made his dispositions and gave his orders. Kitridge liked the young Yankee officer. In turn Graham appeared to be grateful to Kitridge and to admire the Confederate major. But Graham took no chances.

While Kittridge and Dad Summers were not herded with the other prisoners, still they were watched and guarded. As for Zoe, Graham was courtesy itself. He was a gentleman, Kittridge decided. He had met a number of Union officers and Lieutenant Graham would rank high on their list.

With all dispositions finally made, the little squadron mounted. Summers, Zoe and Kittridge rode with Graham but there was a sergeant and two big troopers immediately behind them to guard against escape.

The night was thinning as they left the scene of the fight. Daylight had not come, nor dawn, but the stars were paler and the sky a trifle lighter. They followed the old grass grown track that led from Packer's burned dwelling to the limestone bluff and, having reached that skeleton of a house, turned east until they found a main traveled road and then progressed north along it.

Graham talked as they rode. He spoke of the growing trouble that the army found in dealing with the problem of desertion. Desperate men, men who were not amenable to discipline, who had no moral obligations, or at least recognized none, were leaving the armies, both North and South. Banded together they hung along the flanks of the troops, ravaging the country, robbing, pillaging, committing every sort of depredation. Graham spoke of the harsh orders that Grant had issued concerning these vandals and mentioned too that he knew that Lee had also issued orders, equally harsh, concerning them. The fighting men of both forces respected each other; but they had no love nor liking for the jackals, the human scavengers that hung upon their flanks.

KITTRIDGE listened with but half his mind to Graham's talk. Beside him Zoe was silent and, beyond Zoe, Dad Summers rode very quietly. In Kittridge's mind was the ever-present knowledge of his message for Lee. He was a prisoner, saved from death perhaps, but a prisoner. And north, somewhere beyond Richmond, was Lee. Lee sorely needed Kittridge's knowledge, the spoken message that Johnston had given him. It was true that Richmond had fallen, Graham had confirmed that fact and in his talk had given Kittridge infor-

mation concerning the cavalry screen that Grant had thrown out below the James. Still, if he could get through to Lee, Kittridge might by word he brought give the small thing needed to perfect a plan. Seizing an opportunity when they crossed a little branch, Kittridge rode close to Summers and, bending toward the old man, spoke hastily and low voiced.

"If you get a chance, make a break for it. Get through. The word is that Johnston will move north to effect a union at Danville. Get the word through, Dad!"

Summers nodded once, a sign that he had heard. Then they were across the little stream and riding once again.

Opportunity came when the east was paling and when, below the ridge they followed, they could see the twinkling fires and lights of a cavalry regiment, bivouacked on the plain. To the left of the road there were trees and to the right the ridge sloped away through brush and rock to reach the level ground. Behind their leaders troopers were dozing as they rode, weary and tired and their alertness stifled. Graham rode to Kittridge's left and to him Kittridge spoke courteously, giving fair warning.

"I am surprised, Lieutenant, that you did not take my parole. This is war time, you know."

Summers was looking off toward the left as though he had heard something moving in the timber, and Graham, straightening in his saddle, looked at Kittridge through the lessening gloom and smiled.

"There will be no opportunity for you to escape," he said. "I can tell you, Major, that you will be well treated. This war is almost over. Lee is trapped . . ."

He was looking squarely at Kittridge and he saw the blow coming. He tried to dodge but was too late. Kittridge, in speaking, had warned Dad Summers. He placed his faith on Dad. Dad would get away. Now, tightening his knees against Marshal's sides, he swung his fist squarely at Graham's head.

Graham dodged. As he moved, the hard, clenched hand struck his cheek and he reeled in his saddle, and Kittridge, wheeling Marshal, sought to confuse the following troopers by driving squarely into them. It was a desperate chance that, taken,

might bring fatal results and still it was a chance. As Kitridge forced Marshal back against the other horses there came a second distraction.

Dad Summers had been warned by Kitridge's voice, by the smooth tension in it as the officer spoke. When Galen Kitridge took his chance and swung a blow at Graham, Summers moved. Kitridge had expected Dad to strike away, down the ridge slope, through the brush. He had thought that in the momentary confusion created, one or the other of them would get away. He had expected that escape to be Summers, for he himself did not intend to leave Zoe. But Summers, acting with Kitridge, jerked his horse around and boldly attacked the big sergeant who rode behind them. What he did or how he did it Kitridge could not see, being engrossed with Graham, nor could he see Zoe's sudden action.

Summers, wheeling his horse, caught the heavy Springfield carbine that the sergeant carried across his saddlebows, wrenched it free and struck with the butt. A wicked fighter, Dad Summers, who had learned his trade along the Border and in the Indian country to the West and had perfected it in four years of war. The sergeant went down and Dad's whoop was high and shrill. Zoe, lashing out with the light riding whip she carried, was fortunate enough to cut a trooper's horse across the flank and that tired animal, stung by the blow and not too gentle at best, kicked viciously before it began to buck.

In an instant, there in the lane at the lead of the little column there was wild confusion. The trooper was bucked from his horse. Another flung up his arm to shield his face from Zoe's whip, the sergeant was down and a horse lunged across his body in an effort to avoid it. The troopers in the rear, sleepy and somnolent, were, for the moment taken completely by surprise. Graham's horse slipped in the mud and fell and Marshal leaped across him, landing to slide in the mud and regain his footing. Zoe came clear and Dad Summers, wielding the carbine like a club, struck another man from his saddle and forced his horse to leap across the ditch at the side of the road.

All three were free for the moment and Kitridge's voice lifting in a yell, they

struck toward the timber, leaving shouting, swearing, disorganized men behind them.

THEY were half way across the field before shots followed them. Springfield boomed spitefully and big lead slugs spanked the air close by. The horses labored ahead, up the slope, across the soft and spongy sod and then Graham's voice came clear: "Cease firing! There's a woman with them!"

Two more spasmodic shots followed that command and then came the dull thunder of hoofs on soggy turf. Marshal crashed through breast-high brush, Zoe's mount laboring beside him. The dark loom of trees reached out and then the horses were in the timber. Kitridge turned Marshal left and Zoe's bay swung in line. They went perhaps twenty yards and then Kitridge stopped. Zoe also reined in and, behind them the pursuit struck the brush at the edge of the timber and went ripping through. Down on the road men were still shouting and Kitridge tensed for there was a horse coming through the trees. But it veered and then the sounds of pursuit died away.

"I gonnies," Dad Summers said quietly. "We made it. Damned if we didn't."

Nothing more was said. Both Summers and Kitridge knew that the safe thing to do, the wise thing to do was to remain immobile. Summers, old and wise, had learned that the best way to hide was to be still, to copy the utter motionlessness of the wild thing. Kitridge had learned that too. The horses, weary as they were, were content to be quiet and Zoe emulated her companions. They waited, hearing the pursuit thresh through the brush and the timber, hearing the Yankees call to each other. Twice men passed close by them but did not find them in the lessening night.

Then, with temporary quiet all about, they stirred. Summers, by tacit consent, led the way and Kitridge and Zoe followed him. The old man went through the trees like a ghost, picking a path that was almost indiscernible. Close behind him Zoe rode and, behind Zoe, Kitridge came. The horses walked slowly and then, as the dawn came, Summers increased the gait. For an hour they moved and then, reining in, the old man waited until the others came abreast.

"You know this country, Majah," he suggested. "Weheah to now?"

Kittridge looked all about, selecting landmarks in the growing light. He knew where he was, could pick familiar sites. He nodded to Dad. "The Lynchville turnpike is about two miles west."

"We don't want no turnpike," Dad answered. "This yere country's lousy with blue jackets . . . excuse me ma'am . . . what we want is to stay out of sight."

"And move toward Richmond," Kittridge agreed. "We want to find the army. I say that we'd better go on north, Dad. We can stick to the back roads and the timber."

"Mostly timber," Dad grunted. "All right, you lead out, Majah."

Kittridge led the way. Presently, despite his knowledge of the country he gave place to the older man. Summers, strange as the terrain was to him, seemed to know instinctively where open forest existed and where the way was choked with brush. He seemed to sense where some man, seeking timber for fences or for firewood had made a little road that would allow them to travel easily. They went on as the daylight grew. All the rain clouds had disappeared and the sun was bright and warm on their damp clothing. It was mid-morning when Dad halted.

"We got to stop," he said. "My hawse is played out an' yo' hawse ain't any better, Majah. We got to rest 'em an' grain 'em or we got to get fresh hawses."

Kittridge nodded agreement. Marshal was done, was going on sheer courage, and his rider knew it.

"Yo hawse ain't so weary, Miss Zoe," Summers said. "I mought take him an' go down to that house below. Theah's folks theah an' mebbe I could get some grain an' mebbe a bait fo' us to eat. How about it, Majah?"

If it had been the two men alone Kittridge would have said no, but when he looked at Zoe and saw the deep circles under her eyes, saw the utter weariness written on her face, he gave consent to Dad's plan.

"We'll wait here," he agreed. "Be careful, Dad. Don't take any chances."

Dad Summers grunted. "I won't," he assured. "Let me change saddles with Miss Zoe an' I'll slip down theah like a

shadow stealin' up on a tree at noon. You folks be comfortable, Majah. I'll be back right soon."

DAD SUMMERS was gone for what seemed a long time. While the old man was absent Galen Kittridge and Zoe Fernald sat beside each other, their fingers locked together and waited. There was not much speech between them; there seemed to be no need of speech. It was enough that they were together and, oddly, it seemed as though there was no barrier. To each it was as though life had resolved into a simple thing and that they were drifting with a tide that would carry them to their ultimate desire.

Dad came back, walking up the slope, leading Zoe's horse. There was a grain sack on the horse and Dad pulled it down from the saddle and poured out four small piles of oats. The horses fell to eating and Dad, seating himself beside the others, withdrew a package from his shirt. This he opened, disclosing corn pone, pork and a few cold boiled potatoes. "Best I could do," he commented. "This heah stuff was layin' in the springhouse an' the pone was in the oven outside. They'll miss it when they go to eat dinnah."

"Did you talk to anyone?" Kittridge asked.

Dad shook his head. "Nary," he answered. "I slipped in careful an' found the grain in the shed. The othah stuff was layin' around loose so I he'ped myse'f. No need of pushin' my neck out by talkin' I figgahed."

Kittridge grinned. Dad was a forager par excellence and this was no new experience to him or to the major. He bit into the pone and watched Zoe as she placed pork on a piece of pone and began to eat.

"Yankees are in Lynchburg," Dad announced. "I heahed these folks talkin'. The Yankees been theah some days now. We can't go theah. Lee's moved outen Richmond an' the city's surrendered. Grant's hot aftah Lee. Theah ain' no use of us tryin' to join Lee, Majah. We'd bettah look to our own bacon."

Kittridge shook his head. "Grant hasn't caught Lee yet," he said. "We'll strike northwest from here and see if we can't intercept Lee."

Dad grunted. "Supposin'," he sug-

gested," that we don't find Lee before Grant does. Supposin' the wah's ovah before we find Lee. Then what?"

"I don't know," Kittridge answered. "We could beat back to Johnston, or maybe we could find Kirby Smith. I don't know, Dad. Lee hasn't quit yet."

"But he ain't goin' to fight much moah," Summers said shrewdly. "No use tawkin', Majah. We fit moughthy well but we ain't goin' to win. Lee ain't goin' to lose many moah men. He's goin' to stop killin' folks. You feel the same way yo' se'f. Look at yesterday. Yo' didn't kill that lieutenant."

Kittridge made no comment. Summers ate a bit of pone and spoke again. "Theah ain't goin' to be much in the South for an active man," he said. "Not when the wah's ovah."

Zoe Fernald was looking at Dad. The old man smiled at her. "Theah's a right nice country west of the Missouri," he commented. "Mighty nice." His eyes never leaving the girl's face he proceeded, painting a picture of the raw, new country that lay to the west.

"Good place fo' a man to make a start," Summers concluded. "Lots of land, lots of timber, lots of everythin'. A active man, one that could do things would get along out theah mighty nice. An' there won't be no hahd feelin's out theah when the wah's done. A man is goin' to be too busy makin' a livin' fo hisse'f an' his wife to bothah tryin' to change the othah fellow's politics, I reckon. Goin' to be a good place."

There was a light deep in the girl's brown eyes as she leaned forward toward Dad. "I think so, too," she said. "It's going to be a good place."

Kittridge got up and paced nervously along the length of the clearing. Returning he stopped and looked down at the woman and the older man. "We've got to go on," he said. "The horses are fed and they've rested."

Dad Summers, with a grunt, hoisted himself to his feet. "Miss Zoe," he said, "would you lemme ride yo' hawse? Mine ain't doin' so well an' yo're lightah than me by quite a little."

The girl said, "Why surely, Dad," and Summers, walking to the horses, busied himself preparing to depart.

As they progressed, moving northwest, they continued to cling to the timber. By two o'clock they were well past the vicinity of Lynchburg. All through the late morning and early afternoon, as they rode north, they had heard the heavy roll of gunfire but for an hour it had ceased to sound. Kittridge's eyes again and again strayed to Dad Summer's impassive face, scanning it anxiously and, now and again he looked at Zoe. Zoe saw the apprehensiveness in the major's eyes and could say nothing to erase it. Like her companions she was in doubt, not knowing what transpired.

By four o'clock Kittridge's disquietude had become so great that he halted. There was a hasty consultation with Summers and then a decision was reached. Perilous as it was they must have information and to get it they would go to a main road. With that decided the three went on, now striking straight west. They should reach the pike in an hour.

It was five o'clock before they reached the turnpike. Staying in the timber above the road, looking out across the fields that separated them from the thoroughfare they saw that there were troops moving. First a body of Union Cavalry passed them by, riding in the direction of Appomattox and then, after the road had been empty for a period, they saw a little troop, not in blue, come from the north and move slowly along the turnpike. Dad Summers, with no word to Kittridge, moved out from the timber and trotted across the field to intercept the moving men.

He met them and they halted. There was a long period of waiting and then Summers turned in his saddle and, lifting his arm, beckoned to his companions. With Zoe beside him Kittridge left the shelter of the trees and rode down toward the road.

When he came up he saw that there were but eight men in the troop that had stopped on the road. They were bearded, weary men and their horses were gaunt and worn out. One, a youngster despite his hollow eyes and heavily lined face, saluted as the major halted, the very lifting of his hand seemingly an effort. When he turned to Kittridge, Dad Summer's voice was low and hushed as though he spoke in a church.

"It's finished, Majah," Dad said. "Lee's surrendered."

There was absolute silence following that statement and then a horse stamped. "Surrendered?" Kitridge demanded. "I don't. . . ."

"Major," the young officer on the road looked full at Kitridge, "I can't believe it either. I wouldn't believe it but I was there. I saw Lee and Grant come out of McLean's place and stand on the porch and I saw Lee come down the steps and mount Traveler. I wouldn't believe it but I know it's so." There were tears in the boy's eyes. Behind him the troopers, heads hung, sat silently on their mounts.

"But" Kitridge began.

"We left Richmond," the young officer said. "Grant had too many men. He spread us out too far." The utter apathy in his voice shocked Kitridge. It was as though this youngster, this boy who wore a lieutenant's insignia on his collar, was dead and spoke from death. "We lost the fight at Five Forks and retreated. Grant broke through at Petersburg. We retreated again. Sheridan was below the river and he drove us back to the north bank. We tried, Major." It was as though the boy pleaded for forgiveness. "We tried but we couldn't go any more. We were done. They caught us at Appomattox."

The youngster stopped. Kitridge's eyes too were wet and Zoe was frankly weeping.

"Grant's terms were generous," the youngster said, choking back the tremor in his voice. "He gave us our horses and mules. He said we'd need them to make our crops. The officers kept their private horses and their side arms and baggage. We" The boy could talk no more. Behind him a big trooper, gaunt checked and bearded, moved forward and put his hand on the younger man's shoulder.

"Don't yuh, sonny," the trooper said, compassion in his voice. "Don't yuh. The Majah knows how it is. It ain't no disgrace to lose a fight. We been purely licked this time."

The boy officer's chin was on his chest. He would not, could not, look at Kitridge. "You're going . . . ?" Kitridge began.

"We was lucky," the big trooper said. "The Yanks give us a bait of food. We done taken our paroles. We're goin' home." His eyes, moody and compassion-

ate, fixed themselves on the young officer.

"He kind of belongs to us," the trooper said, still watching the young lieutenant. "I promised his maw I'd look out for him. The Lawd knows I ain't done much of a job but we're goin' home. Was you wantin' somethin' more of us, Majah?"

Kitridge reined Marshal back. He shook his head. "No more," he answered, his voice choked. "Go home. I hope. . . . I hope. . . ."

"Come on, son," the big trooper said. "Come on then."

THE little troop progressed along the road. Beside the fence Summers and Zoe Fernald and Galen Kitridge sat their horses and watched them go. Kitridge's hands were on the pommel of his saddle and he leaned forward even after the troop was out of sight as though he would follow them further with his eyes.

"Majah," Dad Summers said. "There'll be mo' folks along heah. What's yo' pleasure?"

"Lee has surrendered," Kitridge said dully. "Does it matter about me?"

Zoe Fernald turned her horse. Reaching out she possessed herself of Marshal's rein and, leading the horse, Kitridge unresisting in the saddle, she started back toward the trees. Dad Summers followed them.

Just at the edge of the timber the girl stopped and, freeing Marshal, dismounted. Dad, too, got down and, after a moment Kitridge likewise dismounted. Zoe went to him then and put her arms about his neck, drawing his head down to her face. "You have me, Galen," she said, and kissed him.

For a time they stayed there at the edge of the timber, watching the movement on the road. Troops went past, Union men in blue, moving jauntily and yet subdued; gray-clad men, worn and weary, in little groups; transport, heavy wagons, each with a four-horse team straining against the gripping mud; ambulances moving both toward and away from Appomattox. It seemed as though a panorama of the war paraded there on the turnpike and Galen Kitridge watched it with unseeing eyes.

Presently he roused. The sun was low, leveling off above the hills, the glinting beams spearing at them where they waited.

"There's nothing more to do," Kittridge said. "We'll take you home, Zoe."

Zoe Fernald made no answer. Dad Summers walked out to where the horses grazed and, catching them, led them back. "We'll strike for Lynchburg tonight," Kittridge announced. "We can go on to Beckwith's in the morning."

Dad held Zoe's stirrup. When the girl had mounted he gave comment. "Not along that road we won't go to Lynchburg. Theah's too much movin' on it. We ain't surrendered, Majah, an' we ain't give ouah paroles. We'd be stopped."

"Does it matter how we go?" Zoe asked softly, "as long as we're together?"

"Don't mattah a speck, ma'am," Dad answered briskly. "But we'd bettah be doin' it."

Kittridge mounted Marshal. "Theah's a road back of the ridge a piece," Dad announced and turned in toward the timber.

They found the little woods road within a mile. It wandered toward the south and the east, twisting and turning. Twice they passed cabins, deserted, the garden patches weed grown. Once they encountered a negro driving a bony mule. He turned out and gave them the road, watching them pass with big, white-glittering eyes. The dusk came on and the road turned toward the turnpike and Dad Summers spoke abruptly.

"We'uns," he announced, "is plumb tuckered out. We got to find a place to hole up."

"Lynchburg . . ." Kittridge began.

"We won't make Lynchburg tonight," Dad interrupted. "What we want is a place to keep the night offen the lady's haid."

The road turned to the right and, just beyond the bend, there stood a house. The door gaped open and the gate swung free. By mutual consent they stopped. Dad Summers, dismounting, stood at the gate and called. There was no answer.

Glancing at Kittridge, the old man looped his reings over the paling of the fence and went up the walk. He disappeared within the gaping door, only to presently return and come striding down the walk again.

"Nobody theah," he announced. "They pulled out in a hurry, too, likely when the Yankees come. Will we go in, Majah?"

For answer Kittridge swung down and turned to help Zoe dismount. Dad led the horses through the gate and along the walk, following the woman and his officer. At the porch he tied the animals and, while Kittridge helped Zoe up the steps, went past them and into the house. A sulphur match spluttered in Dad's hand and, momentarily, they could see their shelter.

IT was not a tenant's house, nor yet did it belong to a landed man. Rather this was a farmhouse. The door gave into a living-room, topsy-turvy and littered as the match showed. The flame went out and Dad moved off, bumping against furniture and muttering into his beard. He came back carrying a candle stub and bringing information.

"Theah's part of a ham in the kitchen an' some cold pone. I'll stir up somethin' to eat." Kittridge righted a chair and Zoe sat down upon it. Dad went out carrying the candle, leaving them in darkness. They could hear him moving in the rear of the house.

"Do you mind so much, Galen?" Zoe said suddenly out of the darkness. "Surely you knew that it was coming."

"I knew," Kittridge answered heavily, "but now that it's here I can't realize it. I can't believe that Lee has given up. It seems impossible. I knew that the Confederacy was doomed, I've known that for half a year, and yet . . ."

"And yet . . .?" softly.

"And yet it seems as though it hadn't happened. To think of the war being over. To think of there being no more fighting, no more men killed, no more land laid waste. I can't believe it."

"Perhaps Lee thought of that." Zoe's hand stole out and settled on Kittridge's shoulder where he sat beside her. "Perhaps he knew that there must be no more killing, no more raids, no more waste. Perhaps he knew in his heart that the cause was lost, that it had been lost from the beginning."

Kittridge did not answer. The hand moved from his shoulder and stroked his hair. "Galen . . ." Zoe's voice was timid.

"My dear . . .?"

"Have I been too bold? You said that you loved me. Your lips have told me

that. Has it been bold of me to come to you?"

"No, dear."

"I was never married to Murry," Zoe's voice was very small there in the gloom. "I was never his wife. There were words said over us but I never was his. We can break that foolish tie, can't we, Galen?"

"We can break it," Kittridge's voice was strong.

"And then we can go on together," Zoe murmured. "We can go West. Out to the country that Dad told us about. We can live together there where there won't be any hatred." She was musing in the dark, her hand resting on Kittridge's shoulder once again. His own strong hand came up to possess her slender one.

"But the Beckwith place," he said. "It's yours. You lived there. You must love it, Zoe. Would you give it up?"

Dad Summers had ceased to make noises in the kitchen. The house was still. Kittridge's last words seemed to linger in the stillness.

"I'd give it up," Zoe said. "Anything . . . anywhere . . . with you, Galen."

"Zoe . . ." Kittridge began. "I . . ."

There was a thump on the porch. Scrambling, uneven steps sounded. Kittridge sprang up, his hand automatically seeking his side where once his saber had swung. There was no sword there. From the left of the house Dad Summers cursed, his voice indistinct, and then, in the doorway, Bert Loy said: "Majah! Fo' Gawd's sake, Majah. . . ."

"Loy!" Kittridge exclaimed, moving toward the door. "Man, where have you been? What happened to you?"

Loy was leaning against the door casing. They could see his body silhouetted against the lighter sky. He slumped there, spent with exhaustion. With three long strides Kittridge reached him, caught his body and, supporting it, saved him from falling.

"I found you, Majah," Loy panted. "I found you."

"But, man . . ." Kittridge began.

"I slipped away when the fight stahted," Loy gasped. "I saw you hit the big man, Majah. I saw that an' then the Yanks come. I followed Fernald. He run. I been followin' him. All day. I . . . I'm about done, Majah."

Kittridge lowered the man to the floor

and knelt down beside him. Dad Summers was coming around the house and encountering obstacles. His oaths rumbled as he fought free of something that impeded his progress.

"He's out theah, some place," Loy gasped. "He knows yo' heah, Majah. He's got a gun."

"Take it easy, Loy," Kittridge's voice was firm. "You're all right now."

"I wanted a chance at him," Loy gasped. "Just one chance."

"WHAT the hell?" Dad Summers said at the door. "Excuse it, ma'am."

"Bert's come in," Kittridge told Summers. "He says that Fernald is here and knows that we're here. Fernald's armed." The officer's voice was unhurried, unconcerned.

"An' me without Dolly," Summers mourned. "What do you allow to do, Majah?"

Kittridge considered a moment. "Nothing," he answered then. "Fernald hasn't attacked us. There's nothing that we need to do."

Zoe gave a little gasp. "But he will, Galen," she said. "You don't know how bitter he is. You don't know . . ."

"He's got two mo' with him," Loy had recovered his breath. "That's why I didn't jump him. Theah's three of 'em an' they all got guns."

Dad Summers muffled a curse in his beard. Galen Kittridge stared at the door. Fernald was a rabid, vicious dog and he knew that Kittridge, the man he hated, Zoe, the woman he hated and had wronged, and Summers and Loy were in this dark house. "We'll have to move out while it's still dark," Kittridge decided. "It won't do for us to stay here and let him pick us off in the daylight. You put the horses in the barn, Dad?"

"In the barn," Dad agreed, "an' right now, Majah, that skunk is watchin' the barn doah an' waitin' for us to come an' get 'em. It won't do, Majah."

Kittridge nodded his head. Dad was right, it would not do.

"I'll slip out an' scout around," Dad proffered, moving toward the door. "Mebbe . . ." He reached the door. Instantly a shot crashed outside and Dad threw him-

self back from the doorway with an oath. "Clost, that was!" he announced.

Kittridge, leaving Zoe, moved toward the doorway, keeping out of line. "Fernald," he called. There was no answer and he tried again. "Fernald, let Zoe out of here. Let her get clear."

Outside, Murry Fernald laughed tauntingly. "Let my dear wife leave?" he called. "You mistake me, Kittridge. She's the one person that can't leave. You two, you and Zoe. You're the ones I want."

In the room something cracked and then, with a rending sound accompanied by a grunt, Dad Summers straightened up. "Table leg," he whispered. "Makes a good club. Now, by golly. . . ."

"Somebody in the back of the house," Loy announced, interrupting Summers. "Heah? Heah 'em movin'?"

"I left the candle," Summers exclaimed. "Yo' don't reckon"

"Come out, Kittridge," Fernald called. "Come out now before you're roasted out."

From the rear of the house there came a faint snapping sound. A little whiff of smoke drifted into the living-room.

"I reckon we *will* go out," Summers growled. "They've fired the place. I'll go first and. . . ."

"Wait!" Kittridge commanded shortly. "We've got to get Zoe out of here."

"Not without you," Zoe flung back at him. "I won't go without you, Galen. I Perhaps I can bargain with him. If I give myself up"

"You'll not do that," Kittridge snapped. "Dad, there's three of them. Fernald is in front and there's at least one behind the house. I wonder"

"Theah's two windahs," Summers drawled. "Yo take yo' pick, Majah, an' I'll take the othah one. Better get yose'f a table leg."

Kittridge shook his head, unaware that Dad could not see him. His hand, dipping into his pocket, encountered a long, hard object and he drew it out. "I've a knife," he said laconically, opening the long-bladed weapon. "I'll take the east window, Dad."

"An' me the west un," Summers agreed. "Loy, you stay heah with Miz Fernald. Let's move out, Majah. Heah's wheah the cavalry charges."

"Galen!" There was a sob in Zoe's voice. "Galen"

Galen Kittridge bent and kissed her. Then, moving across the room, he reached the east window. It was open. He crouched beside it, peering out into the night. Crouching there, he heard Dad grunt and then the other window slam up. Outside, Fernald called: "Watch the windows!" In the room Loy moved, doing something, Galen could not tell what. The edge of the kitchen door was lined with light, a thin crack of fire showing all around the door. Over across the room Dad Summers moved. Something crashed outside, beyond Dad, and instantly there was a shot. Gathering himself, Galen Kittridge dived through his open window, striking the ground on his shoulder and rolling clear.

He was in a tangle of bushes. Thorns tore at him, ripping flesh and clothing. Last year's canes, hard and stiff and armed with thorns, took their toll.

It was impossible to remain in the rose bush. Kittridge fought his way out of it, crashing through the thorns. He made plenty of noise, that was unavoidable, and as he gained his feet, clear at last of the entanglement, he saw a man come running around the corner of the house, lift up a gun and fire.

The running man missed. Kittridge lost the sound of the bullet in the roar of the weapon but he was untouched. He went in then, knife held like a sword, crouching, feet feeling and clinging to the earth. The man he encountered raised his rifle high and swung down a blow. He was slow and clumsy. It seemed to Kittridge that he was as clumsy as his opponent but in reality he moved like a flash. The gun swung down but he was past it, close against his adversary, and the long-bladed knife was reaching in, groping for life. In his ear his antagonist yelled once, terribly, frightfully, venting a scream that ended in a bubbling shriek. Then Kittridge was free and stooping down to scoop up the gun, to search frantically for ammunition and to find a few cartridges in a limp coat pocket.

The rifle he had won was an Army Springfield. Kittridge jerked the breech up and open, threw the spent shell away and, stuffing in a fresh load, ran around the corner of the house. Instantly he was greeted by firing. From the trees beside

the gate a rifle boomed a ring of flame. Kittridge felt something tug at his coat as though an unseen hand had caught his shoulder for an instant and then freed him. He returned the fire, reloaded hastily and, crouching, made for the front of the house. There was light all about him now. The back portion of the house was blazing and the flames had worked their way to the shingle roof. His shot was not answered from the trees by the gate. Kittridge, backing away from the gate toward the house, called to Zoe. From within she answered him.

"Come out!" he ordered. "Run through the door and drop down."

Zoe called an answer. Kittridge did not turn his head but kept his eyes fixed on the shadow beside the gate. He heard Zoe's movement as she cleared the door, her step on the porch, and then he fired for there was movement in the trees. Zoe screamed, not hurt but frightened. Relief flooded Kittridge. The shot from the gate had missed. So also had his return and now he was boldly exposed, thrown into sharp relief by the fire behind him.

"Are you all right, Zoe?" he demanded.

"All right," came Zoe's answer. "Galen, get down. Come to me. You . . ."

Again there was movement in the shadow of the trees. Again Kittridge lifted the Springfield. This was the last shot, his last cartridge. He did not pull the trigger. A man rose up just within the shadow of the trees, a squat man, heavy shouldered and bearded. Dad Summers. Summers leaped in, yelling. From the other side of the gate Loy lifted his voice. There was a scuffling noise, men writhed in the shadow and then came a frightened scream. Kittridge ran forward, rifle ready.

There was no need. Dad Summers was sprawled out, holding a man beneath him and beside him Loy stood, holding a rifle, eagerly searching for an opportunity to use it. The squirming man beneath Summers ceased his struggles and Dad lifted himself cautiously, his big hands still stretched out and fixed on the throat of the man beneath.

"Loy!" Kittridge commanded sharply. "Drop that!" Loy had the gun pointed down, his finger on its trigger, his face a ruddy mask of hatred. "Stop it, I say!"

Very slowly Loy lifted his head. Summers was up now, hauling his captive to

his feet. In the light from the burning house Fernald's face was pallid, his mouth open, his eyes wide and terror-struck.

"Don't let him out that easy, Bert," Dad rasped. "He ain't wuth a ca'tridge."

Loy lowered the gun. Summers spat, his right hand clamped on Fernald's shoulder. "Yo' all right, Majah?" Summers asked. "Is the lady all right?"

"I'm not hurt," Kittridge answered. "Zoe . . ."

"I'm not hurt, either," Zoe interjected.

"I kilt that fellow out behin'," Loy said slowly. "Whar's the othah one, Majah?"

Kittridge looked at Loy without expression. "He was at the corner of the house when I came out," he answered.

Summers grunted. "I see you got his gun," he said. "Well . . . Loy?"

THE two men looked at each other. They excluded Kittridge. He was outside their unspoken council, excluded from it.

"Yeah," Loy drawled.

"Theah's rope in the barn," Summers said casually and yet with utter menace in his voice.

"What are you going to do?" Fernald babbled the words. "Kittridge, don't let them. Don't! Zoe . . ."

"What are you going to do, Dad?" Kittridge found his voice, his mouth and throat dry.

"Do?" Dad looked at the major. "We're goin' to hang him, Majah."

"Don't let them!" Fernald wailed. "Kittridge! Zoe . . . You're my wife, Zoe! You love her, Kittridge! You . . ." His knees buckled and he would have fallen except for Summers' strong grasp.

"You can't do that!" Kittridge found his voice again. "I forbid it! I . . ."

"Majah," Dad Summers' voice was very calm, "we ain't in the Army no mo'. Lee's surrendered. You always been our officah. We always minded yo'. Now we ain't goin' to. If yo' try to stop us, Loy an' me'll tie yo' up. This yere's one co't-martial that ain't nohow goin' to fail. Loy, you ready?"

Loy moved to Fernald's other side. The man was babbling, mouthing words, slobbering them out. Kittridge turned his head away. He was helpless before the grim determination of the other two. And he

knew that they were just, that Dad Summers and Bert Loy were right.

"Yo' stay heah with the lady, Majah," Summers admonished sternly. "Stay with her." He swung Fernald before him, pushing the man along. Zoe was close to Kitridge, burying her face in his chest, her arms tight locked about him, binding his arms.

"Dad . . ." Kitridge began.

"It ain't no use, Majah," Summers said. "Push him along, Bert."

They were alone, Zoe Fernald and Galen Kitridge. They stood, a single figure, locked together there before the burning house. Kitridge tried to free his arms and the girl clung all the tighter, lifting her face so that she looked into his eyes.

"Zoe," Kitridge said, "let me go, girl. I've got to . . ."

"No," Zoe's lips formed the word but he could hardly hear it. "No! Oh, Galen! Galen!"

She released him now, slumping against him. Galen Kitridge's strong arms held her up. Tenderly, gently he half carried her to where a bench stood beside a big elm. There he sat her down, resting beside her. Zoe buried her face against his neck and he sought to comfort her.

"I'll stop them, dear. I won't . . ."

Again the girl lifted her face and her arms clung tight. "You must not leave me," she said. "It . . . it's terrible, Galen . . . but . . . it's just." Again she rested her face against his neck and Kitridge, bending his head, felt the sweet, warm breath of her hair against his lips.

THEY were sitting beside the elm when Dad Summers and Bert Loy returned. The two men came around the house, where now all was fire, walking slowly, and each

leading two horses. They stopped before the pair upon the bench, and as they halted Zoe raised her head. Dad Summers stood silent for a moment, legs wide spread, head shoved forward, bushy eyebrows hiding his eyes. Then he spoke.

"It's time fo' us to go."

Zoe freed herself from Kitridge's arms and stood erect, facing Dad. Summers met her look squarely. "We done the right thing," he said stubbornly. "Now it's time to go."

"It's time to go," Zoe repeated softly.

Dad's head came up and his shoulders straightened as though freed from some heavy load. "But wheah will we go?" he demanded. "Yo' got a place back theah," he waved his hand toward the south. "Yo' got yo' home an' . . ."

Zoe looked at Galen Kitridge and then back to Summers. "We go west," she said suddenly, decisively. "We'll go where there is no more war and no more hatred, Galen and I."

Old Dad Summers grunted. A glint of a smile showed in his eyes. "West, huh?" he said.

Galen, too, was now standing on his feet, his arm about Zoe. "We go west," he said.

"Well, then," Dad Summers turned to the silent Loy, "we'll all go west. How about it, Loy?"

"I go with the Majah," Loy said loyally.

"And I," Zoe echoed.

"Me, too," Dad Summers grunted. "Some place ovah west we'll find a pahson an' then . . ." He stopped, stared at Kitridge and Zoe for an instant and then turned toward his horse.

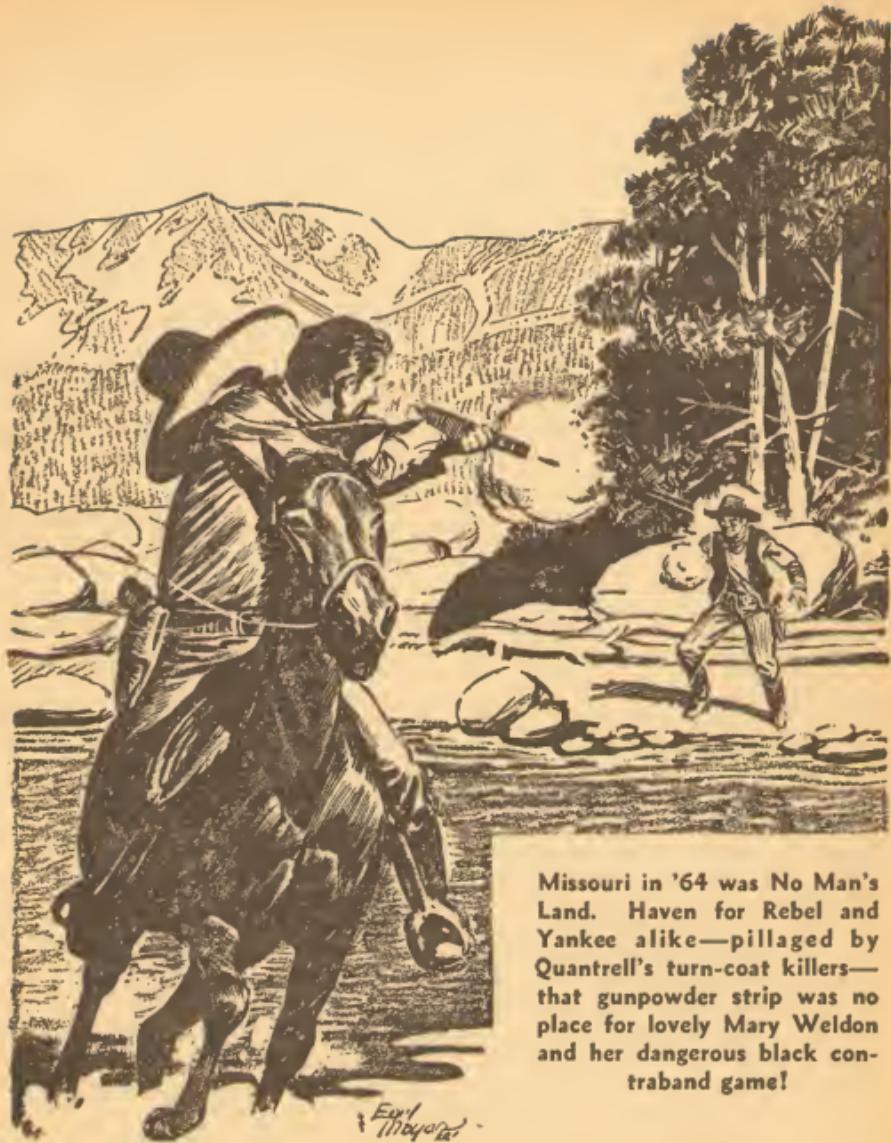
"Theah's nothin' keepin' us heah," Dad Summers said. "Let's ride west."



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Rifles of Rebellion

By JOHN STARR

FORT BENTON, MISSOURI! Within forty years it had experienced more contrasts of living than the oldest of the Eastern cities. The Fort had

become a thriving town, with scores of boats waiting to discharge cargo, or carry back both the lucky and unfortunate to the States. The stream of wagon trains ar-

riving from and departing for the mines seemed to be endless. Everyone appeared to have gold, and many were intent on spending and wasting it.

It was late spring in the year 1864. One of the river steamers had docked an hour before, and longshoremen were busily unloading the valuable cargo. From the pilot house descended the debonair figure of Dandy Jim Jacques, crack pilot for Joseph La Barge, who owned many steamboats which plied the Missouri and Mississippi. The pilot was immaculately dressed from the crown of his soft gray hat to his polished boots of French calf. He was pulling on his kid gloves as he walked down the gangplank, when a nondescript figure suddenly rushed up, threw his arms about him and roughly started dancing him from side to side.

"What the devil? Hi, stop jiggling me! Who the devil—dawggone! Lige! Old Lige Brant! You onery looking hound!

"Damme, why don't you shave? You look more ferocious than any of Quantrrell's guerrillas back home. Judas up a tree, but I'm glad to see you! A long drink and a long talk. . . . Have you made your everlasting fortune? Are you going down with me, Lige? I'm the lightning pilot, you know. Three hundred dollars every week, whether afloat or speared by a snag."

Brant's bearded face was divided by a grin of sheer joy as he seized his friend by the arm and hurried him by the line of moored steamboats to a vacant spot on the river bank. There he halted and pulled his friend down beside him and eagerly began asking countless questions. He anxiously inquired for the latest news of the war.

Jacques told him:

"Cotton, if it can get to England, is as valuable as gold is up here. England's simply got to jump in and help the South. Oh, don't draw any long faces. I know you're a sneaking old Yankee at heart even if you did come from my neck of the woods. Seems as if the fighting had been going on for a million years. But I've stuck to the river. It's an awful business, this thing of Americans killing off Americans."

Brant's face lengthened as he said:

"I'll be late in getting in, but I'm going.

But you keep out. Stick to the river. God forbid we both went in to battle and by accident shot each other.

"You old murderer! Ever I have the chance to git you at the end of a rifle I'll shoot some sense intuh you. England's got to kick in."

"If she does she'll buck into a rare bunch of trouble. Gold from up here is helping the North a heap."

Jacques said ruefully: "And I'm fool enough to carefully pilot it down for the North to use."

"If the Union's busted into two pieces both chunks will be gobbled up by nations across the water. . . . Listen, Jacques, ever see the Weldons?"

"Yes. They're just the same. The old man is suspected of running niggers North, and some of the border ruffians have threatened to get him. He's gone into hiding in southern Missouri, or northern Arkansas—depends on what sheriff is chasing you. No one knows just where the State boundary line is. A God-forsaken place."

"You've visited them?" Brant asked.

"Meaning the Weldons, not the State boundary lines? Yes. After every trip. Have just time for a short fling in St. Louis and pay them a brief visit. Then it's back to this damn river again and my blessed three hundred a week."

"And Mary?"

"A real handsome girl. You still set a heap by her?"

"Always did from the first time I saw her. I've made my pile, some twenty thousand. Got a mighty big surprise for you. I'm going back with you."

"Huhhah!" And in his exuberance Jacques snatched off Brant's ragged fur hat and flung it into the river. Then he added his own expensive head covering, and cried, "Let's have them think both of us are walking on the bottom of the river." He cast a pilot's eye at the hats. "Your hat sank right over a twenty-foot bar. Mine will clear the point by just twenty feet, if the current hasn't shifted."

Brant stared out over the turbid current, rolling by with the impetus of the Yellowstone's vast contributions. His voice was low, and he was embarrassed as he finally asked—

"She isn't bespoke, is she?"

JACQUES' merry mood vanished. His gaze shifted to watch the fleet of fleecy clouds blowing down from the North and the Blackfoot country. His voice was low and hesitant as he slowly answered.

"That's a mighty hard question, old-timer. I can say 'no' as far as any promise goes. But I wouldn't be your friend if I didn't 'low that I've grown to feel about Mary just as you do. At first I felt guilty, then just sort of meeching. Well, you know a man can't always pilot his own mind."

Brant nodded, his face sobering. He was quick to admit:

"Of course, she would see a mighty big difference between Dandy Jacques and just me. Any girl would. But I'm much obliged for your telling me so frank and honest."

"Hard-a-port!" cried Dandy Jim Jacques. "Don't let any wild horses run away with you, son. Nothing is settled. I've never asked her point-blank. But her old man must feel I love that scenery down there if I'm not after Mary, the times I go there. When we finish the sail down the river, if we do finish it, I'll take my fling in St. Louis, and in the meanwhile you'll have had a chance to learn who's what."

Brant said slowly: "That's mighty handsome of you, Jim. But no woman ever can come between us and our old friendship."

"No, siree! Never! Let's go and eat."

Brant seized his arm, and led or shoved a way through the milling mass of men who jammed the riverfront. Returning exiles and adventuring pilgrims were afoot, a horse and jammed into old overland coaches, which bore the marks of road agents' lead and red arrows. Long lines of wagon trains were impatiently waiting to be loaded with freight for the gold country.

"I'd rather fight Missouri River snags and cross-currents and shifting bars than to work my passage through such confusion," said Jacques, as his friend led him into an eating place and secured two seats at a table by the rear windows, which opened on the majestic river.

Two bearded mountain men, dressed in tanned skins and wearing fur hats and moccasins, were their immediate table com-

panions. Jacques disliked the environment and suggested:

"I know a better place than this. You come along with me. No matter how big the crush, I'm served at once. French Pete's place. Told him I'd jettison all his supplies on the first bar if he ever kept me waiting two minutes after I'd given my name. That's the fun of being a lightning pilot."

His voice carried, and the trappers stared at him truculently. One hiccuped grandly and remarked:

"Ye seem to be some sort of a simon-pure hellion. Yer ma know ye're out?" The man's nose was that of a hawk, and his eyes bored like gimlets.

Dandy Jacques stiffened, and a hand dropped carelessly to a waistcoat pocket where he carried a derringer of murderous caliber. Brant laid a restraining hand on his arm. Then he arose and snapped his fingers under the mountain man's nose. He growled:

"No acting up, ye old scound'el. This man's my friend, same as you are. He's La Barge's lightningest lightning pilot. He comes from where I used to live, southern Missouri. Jim, meet Long Thomas and his partner, Runty Bill. Boys, this is Dandy Jacques, who has a heap big river medicine."

The mountain men grunted and the tall one said with dignity:

"If he's friend of yers, Lige, he's welcome to this Elk lodge of Hy-yah-ah braves." With that he threw back his head and loudly sang in the tongue of the Teton Sioux a song of the Elk Society.

The short man remarked:

"Joe La Barge is a stout feller. Ye must 'mount to somethin' if ye suit Joe. But all them do-da fixin's! Ye look more gallus than a Dakohta squaw after she's got her winter stock of beads from the Government. What ye goin' to eat? Me'n' this cripple alongside once et half a buf'ler inside of twelve hours out in the Big Horn country. Derned old fool says he won't ever eat ag'in till he can have 'nother side of buf'ler. He's drunk."

"Ain't 'nough whisky in the world to make me drunk. . . . *He taku wakan!*"

The song was violently interrupted by a hand clapped over the singer's mouth, and the short man was admonishing:

"Crazy drunk, ye ol' fool! Singin' a sacred song outside the lodge!" Then he amiably asked Jacques, "Yer river boat can go anywhere, I reckon."

"I am careful to give snags a wide berth," replied Jacques. "Boats trying to race me down the river also are a great danger. Gros Ventres fired on us at the Tobacco Garden, coming up this trip. If the annuities haven't been received by the river tribes before I start back they'll shoot at us considerable. Coming up I saw six dead miners, scalped and mangled, thirty miles below Fort Berthold. They'd gone down in a keel, and how they managed to get that far is beyond my figgering. And once I enter the State of Missouri there's always a fine chance of being shot up by guerrillas at the high wooded bank near Sibley, or at any other likely place. They're after the gold we're always taking down to the States, of course."

This bit of information, carelessly given, impressed the mountain men. The tall one sententiously remarked:

"Young feller, ye seem to have a hell of a job. Reckon ye earn yer salt. Have to keep on steerin', no matter what happens."

"Of course. That's my job. But the pilot house is sheathed with boiled plate and has iron plates to cover half the windows."

With a snort of disgust the mountain man remarked:

"An' I was s'posin' ye give the reds a square shake, shot for shot. Why, for what ye git in wages I'd float downstream, way to St. Louis, on a poplar log."

LONG THOMAS startled Jacques by throwing back his head and bellowing:

"*Sunka micila yukan hinchan!*" Runtly Bill followed, and roared in English:

"A wolf I consider myself, but the owls are hootin'!"

To Jacques he explained:

"Wolf song. Teton Sioux man used to sing it. Dead, or- that danged old fool would never dare to sing it. Never see licker git him so quick. He's failin'. Ain't had more'n a measly quart since we drunk the first quart apiece this mornin'."

The singer nodded toward the door and said:

"My song's a wolf medicine song. See what it's fetched in." He spat disgustedly.

Jacques and Brant turned their heads and beheld what the mountain men had been quick to notice. A tall man, dressed in wolf skins, had entered the place. He carried a big leather bag slung over his shoulder. His gaze was wild, and he jerked his head from side to side in a peculiar manner. Thomas explained to Jacques:

"It's Tall Amos, the wolf hunter. Has a line of pizened meat miles back. Wolves gobble the bait an' die. He gits good money for the pelts."

"There's something alive in that bag," softly exclaimed Brant.

"Prob'ly a wolf cub."

Jacques eyed the new arrival curiously. A bartender leaned forward and motioned for the man to leave.

The wolfer bared his yellow teeth, snarled like a wolf and snapped at the bartender's hand. Jacques laughed at the bartender's sudden fear. But Brant and the mountain men smiled not at all. The wolfer swung himself upon the bar and fumbled with the thong which secured the mouth of the bag.

"What's the matter with those two men?" cried Jacques, as Long Thomas and Runtly Bill as one leaped to the open windows and dived through headfirst to light on their hands and knees as easily as cats. Runtly Bill yelled the warning:

"Tall one's *heyoka!* Come out of thar! He's crazy!"

The patrons of the place, more or less tightly hemmed in by the tables, were concentrating their attention on the intruder, whose eyes rolled and glared as if he were bereft of his senses. As he fumbled with the fastening of the big bag he exclaimed in a high pitched voice:

"Old Amos never had no luck. Ye purty folks live warm 'n' dry. Ye don't have to run no wolf line an' skin the critters afore they can freeze. Ye can eat an' Guzzle hot whisky. So I've fetched something some of ye never saw."

He paused and grinned insanely at the gaping diners. Then he lowered his voice, as if being confidential, and in his wailing voice announced:

"Old Amos fetched ye a wolf!"

Some of the onlookers were afraid, but ashamed to confess it. Some were merely

impatient. And some were angry. These last began calling out for the proprietor to oust the nuisance. But there was that in the wolfer's bearing that caused the drink servers hastily to quit the bar. The wolfer chuckled softly. With an abrupt transition he was snarling and showing his teeth. In a ferocious climax he yelled:

"Damn your hides! Ye live soft! Ye live warm! Old Amos lives hard an' sleeps cold. Ye know what's in this mess of rawhide? It's a wolf!" He paused for the effect to register.

"Kick it outdoors for the dawgs to chaw an' have a drink," advised a burly freighter.

"Kick it outdoors! Ha!" Then his voice deepened and he shouted, "Why, you poor damn coots, my wolf's mad! Gone mad! He bit me! Here! Some of you smarties kick him out doors!"

And with a flint of his hands he upended the bag and dumped a gray wolf on the floor.

For a count of five the patrons of the place stared and made no move to escape. For the space of time the wolf dragged himself heavily, as if nailed to the floor, and his eyes were blazing green emeralds. The muzzle writhed and exposed the long fangs, a scratch from which would sentence a man to die from hydrophobia. With a shriek of mad merriment the wolfer kicked the beast with his moccasined foot and shouted:

"He bit me, damn him! I'm follerin' his trail! I'll take some comp'ny along with me!"

Jacques' eyes dilated. He was paralyzed with terror. The wolf slowly approached him. Brant, with business-like precision, drew a gun and fired. The terrible beast whirled and snarled at the air, snapped at its own feet, and dropped dead on the rough floor. Jacques plunged in terror from his place and rushed for the door. The wolfer howled like the game he had poisoned, and with mouth open and teeth as deadly as those of the dead beast, crouched to pounce upon the horrified pilot. Brant leaped on to a table to avoid hitting his friend, and fired again. The wolfer gave a strangled yell and fell dead upon the floor. Then, bounding after his half crazed friend, Brant caught him under the arms and half carried, half dragged him

to the river bank. He ran back to the doorway of the eating house and called out:

"Some of you know me. I'm Lige Brant, fresh from the diggin's. To those who don't know me—you all bear witness I had to shoot that poor man to save my friend."

"It was God's mercy to him and all of us that you potted him," said the freighter in a weak voice. "I've seen men die of mad wolf bites. It ain't a pretty sight."

Hurrying back to where Jacques was sitting, his eyes still filled with terror, Brant sharply commanded:

"Kick out of that! There's no danger now. Get up on your feet."

"My God! If he'd had the run of the place!" faintly exclaimed Jacques.

"Then every man he bit or scratched, no matter how slight the wound, if it broke the skin, would have died as a mad dog. That poor man! Yet it was the greatest mercy one could show him."

"My legs are strings," weakly complained Jacques. "Help me back to the pilot house. I won't step ashore again. Mad wolves and mad men can scare me half to death any time. Ask anything you will for this bit of work you've done for me, Lige, and I'll grant it. You own all my money, my life. Both are yours for the asking."

"You're not yourself. You owe me nothing, old man. If ever I want a favor I'll ask it simply because I've always known I could ask it. This business has nothing to do with it."

"Ask anything under God's blue heavens and I'll gladly grant it if it's anything a human being can grant," vowed the lightning pilot.

ONCE the initial efforts of the Federal Government had eliminated all doubt as to where stood the States bordering the banks of the Ohio, the line of cleavage between the Federal and seceding States was clearly marked from the Atlantic to the Mississippi River. Beyond the latter, especially in southern Missouri and northern Arkansas, there was much confusion. This debatable terrain held a hybrid growth of sentiment, both for and against the Union.

Before hostilities began, a great many

"Castles" of the Knights of the Golden Circle were being erected in Texas, and this, and similar forms of secret organizations, spread rapidly. The avowed purpose of these various bodies was the destruction of the Republic's nationality. An empire based upon slavery was to be set up, with its center in Havana, and including Cuba and the richest provinces of Mexico. Its south to north diameter was to extend from the Isthmus of Darien to the southern border of Pennsylvania.

Missouri presented a double problem, consisting of the inevitable invasion from the South, and the hidden menace of the secret societies throughout the State. Whether these be Knights of the Golden Circle, Sons of Liberty, or American Knights, their purpose was identical.

At the opening of 1864 in Missouri no man was sure of the political complexion of his neighbor unless the two happened to be affiliated with the same secret society. Marauding bands of border ruffians rode and killed for booty. Fear constantly stalked the citizens of the river counties. Bands of irregulars from Kansas, claiming burning devotion to the cause of liberty, raided into Missouri and added to the lawlessness. Loyal to neither North or South, and unwilling to take a chance with death in fighting for or against the Union, scoundrels left burning buildings and a litter of dead in many of the outlying districts. Of all these bloody nightriders the name of Quantrell easily stood foremost.

In this disputed area, claimed by both Arkansas and Missouri, no taxes were paid, no sheriff's writs were recognized; nor could there be any compulsory participation in the death struggle.

Some of these conditions were new to Lige Brant, long absent from the country. His gold was safely housed in a St. Louis bank. After parting from Dandy Jacques in St. Louis he had traveled southwest and, in a roundabout way, came to the upper waters of Strawberry Creek, an affluent of the Black. Now that he had arrived he found his burning eagerness changing to a strange hesitation. It was based on fear and was fed with doubt. He was recalling the gallant figure of Jacques, lounging about the office of the Palmer House, and on intimate terms with men high in the councils of the North-

ern leaders; and yet a friend of those who were for the South.

He had spent but one hectic night with his friend, following him from hotel to barroom to gambling hall and marveling at his apparent indifference in winning or losing. He saw his friend wager a month's salary on the turn of a card, and he heard him laugh when he lost. An elderly gambler, once a figure in respectable circles, dubbed the pilot Young Midas. The name followed him from waterfront to outlying mansions, with Jacques endeavoring to live up to it. Brant had endeavored to reason with his feverishly active friend, but the latter merely laughed and ordered more wine. In the stark gray of the morning he told Brant:

"This is my holiday. That damn river is lonely when you can't have an eye for anything except cross-currents, new bars, hidden snags, with Injuns ready to shower you with lead and arrows from every bluff. If Venus should walk along a sand point to go in swimming, I'd have to be watching in another direction to discover what new mischief the old river was developing. Now you heed my advice. I shall be here about ten days longer. What hay you have to make down on Strawberry Creek must be made in that time, Lige."

"Lawd, Jim! Who could stand a show against you? Your boots alone would catch almost any girl. But I'll be off Strawberry Creek before you show up."

"Polished boots never won a girl yet," Jacques had replied sleepily.

Now the journey was all but ended. A fourth of a mile away was the girl who had been in Brant's mind and heart throughout his long absence. He had traveled in an erratic course to escape bands of irregulars who were active between the Black and the Mississippi. A short distance west of the creek he had left his horse to graze in a grassy opening, and hungrily had forded the waist deep waters. Then indecision and timidity assailed him. He dropped on the bank and dabbled his feet in the water. Suddenly he was seeing the unreasonableness of his expectations. The pleasing structure he had built up during his exile in the rugged gold country tumbled to nothingness. He could see the trim and gallant figure of his friend. He could not believe that any

maiden would hesitate a moment in choosing between himself and Dandy Jacques.

DESPITE his trepidation, the instinct of self-preservation kept half his mind on the alert. He knew that death struck unexpectedly in that disputed region. As indecision held him back he instinctively kept tabs on his surroundings. A squirrel came hurrying through the tops of the stunted post oaks. Mechanically his hand went to his belt. Then he glimpsed something moving in the growth. He watched keenly until he beheld a funnel shaped sunbonnet. His face burned red hot. He had helped to round up the desperate Plummer gang in Montana, but never in all his experiences had his heart raced so madly. He concentrated his gaze on the shallow stream. He did not hear the soft steps behind him until a drawling voice inquired:

"Howdy, stranger. Lost your way?"

He came to his feet, both hands outstretched, and stared hungrily at the comely and slightly freckled face under the bonnet.

Her voice was scarcely audible as she exclaimed:

"Lige Brant! Back from the mines!"

"Mary, you walk as sly as a Cherokee scout. . . . Yes, I'm back. Came down with Jim Jacques, La Barge's crack pilot. Lawd, but it's good to see you. Home folks, you know."

"I'm mortal glad to see you, Lige. You seemed awful young to go 'way up there to Montana. Where's Jim, just now?"

"Business keeps him in St. Louis for a bit. Mighty popular with the big bugs. A heap of them have traveled up and down the river with him. Banked on his nerve and skill for their very lives. Don't know anybody more important than a lightning pilot. Gits twelve hundred dollars a month! He's the handsomest man I ever saw. He's coming down here pretty soon."

MARY seated herself on the bank and motioned for him to do likewise. She frowned slightly, and tilted her head as if listening. He asked:

"Anything the matter, Mary?"

"Two men stopping at our place. I came here to be shut of them."

Brant hurriedly drew on his boots, his

dark eyes asking questions. She took account of his two revolvers; and in her slow, drawling, yet serious voice said:

"Don't you go to be too wild, Lige. Pap's always able to carry himself like a double hitch and a fighting dawg under the wagon. It ain't time for you to come tearing out of the wilderness. The strangers are Quantrell's men. Camping on the north side of the fence. And such a clutter of hand guns! Four to six in each belt."

"Come to trouble your pap?" Lige asked.

"Would I be here if the Weldons were in for a wring? They ain't wearing any war paint yet. Quantrell may come any time with the rest of his outfit. Whole band is working north to Clay County. Pap, being a Jeff Davis man, stands all right with them so far. But being for Abe Lincoln, myself, I dusted out before my tongue talked me into any sort of trouble."

"Shucks, Mary! I hope your pap won't have any truck with that trash. They talk about Quantrell way up above Fort Benton. He and his men ain't either for North or South. Just plumb hellfire—when the odds are on their side. How they treat you?"

"Very polite."

"Mary, I don't believe it. You look and act scared."

"I came here to get clear of them," she whispered. "I'm mighty glad to find you—Listen!" Her eyes widened with fear as she turned her head. Then she drew a deep breath of relief as she recognized the sound to be that of men singing. "Feared for a second they'd jumped him," she murmured. "Just singing, or think they be. They're at the rum. I wish they'd go."

"Your pap ought to be safe even with that breed, being for the South," Lige encouraged.

"Oh, pap's sound on the goose to their way of thinking. But it happens I ain't."

"You talk mysteries," impatiently accused Brant. "If I'm your friend and can be trusted, why don't you tell things?"

"I'd trust you anywhere, any time. But I don't want to mix you up in my troubles. But if that scum should go prowling around, and should find out a certain secret, they'd never believe pap is a Jeff Davis man. Lige, I haven't asked how you fit

in with all this terrible war. But no matter where you stand I know I can always trust you."

"To the hilt, Mary! I'm North. But if you was the rankest rebel that ever lived you could trust me with your every thought. What is it?"

Glancing warily about, and then talking in a low whisper, Mary told him:

"I have three runaway negroes near here. They managed to git this far from way down in lower Arkansas. If the bushwhackers happen upon 'em, they'll kill 'em. If they opine pap knows anything about it, they'll kill him. They'd believe our place is an underground station for getting blacks inside the Union lines."

Lige was worried.

"How come you did that, girl, with your pap being South?"

"All our family has strong wills. Pap and me get along by agreeing not to try to change each other's notions. If ma had lived she'd been for the North. But I'm worried. If the bushwhackers go to mooning around much they may find the blacks. If that happens—" She left the sentence uncompleted.

"Stop fretting. Ain't I here? I've fought it out with Injuns and outlaws. If they find the blacks I'll say they're mine."

"They'd never believe it. They'd have to know you've been out the country for a long time. It would be your death sentence."

Brant scowled heavily and his voice was very serious as he said:

"Our tribe never was much for bragging. But I'm not wearing these guns just to balance myself."

"But you'd have no chance!" she insisted. "They never give a man a chance. That's why they're what they are. And each man is a dead shot. I want you to pull out—now."

"My going won't unscramble any trouble that's threatening your cabin," Brant replied. "Scarcely can expect me to pull out and leave you here to suffer if they happen upon the niggers and learn you was hiding them. And why are you playing old Beecher's game, anyway? The Government has freed the slaves. Let the Government finish the job."

"But the bulk of them are not free. And they're worse off than ever before. So I

hoed in, in my small way. Please go now, Lige."

He smiled grimly and said:

"Of course. And leave you alone to face these devils. Where's the hideout?"

Mary hesitated, tilted her pretty head and listened, and then leaned close to him and whispered:

"In the old ha'nted fish camp on Tuggle Crick, straight west a quarter of a mile. Only the poor creatures don't know it's ha'nted."

"Why, I crossed it! Passed within a rod of the camp."

BRANT was more concerned than he cared to admit. Even if the strip of country where they were sitting were free soil the plight of a colored man would be pitiable if found by any Southern band of irregulars. Especially was the hatred of Quantrell and his men most venomous, now that the hopes of the seceding States were on the wane. As he listened to the bandits singing an old song he recalled the merciless raiders' proclivity for drinking with a cabin dweller, and singing lustily, and then concluding by cutting their host's throat.

"Each of them has four or more revolvers and a rifle," whispered the girl.

"And neither of them can shoot only about so many guns at one time." Brant came to his feet and added, "I reckoned when I come here that I had something to say to you, Mary. Something important—to me. But it must wait till your company's gone. I'll pick up the blacks and work them north until I can strike free soil. That means wherever Federal troops have control. I ought to get them to the head of the Tuggle before dark. I'll be at your cabin tomorrow morning."

A shrill whistle pierced the quiet of the growth. The girl's eyes filled with fear. There followed the baying of dogs.

"What's ailing you?" quickly asked Brant. "Only your pap's bear dawgs, letting out a few hoots."

"Can't you tell the voice of our dawgs?" she whispered. Then she added, "I was forgetting. We didn't have this pack when you went to the mountains. Hark! Those are not our dawgs that you hear. Must be a parcel of man trackers that the guerrillas fetched along and left tied in the

bush. Hear them! They seem to be following my trail!"

"The crick's only waist deep. Wade upstream, keeping under this bank. You can be home and in a dry gown before the two men get back. Off with your shoes."

"But you, Lige?" Mary anxiously asked as she pulled off her rough footgear.

He picked her up, gently lowered her into the placid stream and assured her:

"I'll stick along here till you round the first bend. Then I'll be off for the fish camp. They won't bother me along of any niggers even if they run into me."

"They'd kill you for being a stranger even if there wasn't a black man in the State."

"Bet four bits against a million dollars in reb paper money that they can't make me turn a hair. Had several run-ins with the Plummer gang along Alder Crick. Get along, so's I can be off."

THE girl breasted the sluggish current rapidly, keeping close to the bank. At the bend she looked back. Lige had crossed to the west bank and was signaling for her to go on. She was soon out of sight, but Brant did not elect to withdraw farther from the stream. He did step into the growth to conceal himself, but when he beheld dogs, instead of men, he emerged again. Three of the animals were huge and looked to be ferocious. These were the killers. The fourth was a hound, the pilot. He came to a halt where the girl had taken to the water and then began nosing up and down the bank. Then he jumped into the stream to try the other bank. The big dogs followed.

"The miserable brutes, to set those devils on a trail," thought Brant "Or to leave them unleashed, to go where they will."

He was further infuriated by hearing rough voices profanely calling out encouragement to the dogs. Drawing a revolver, he fired three shots very rapidly, and each bullet ended the career of a big beast. A chorus of terrible oaths greeted this outburst of fire, and two men came pounding along the creek path. Retiring to cover Brant reloaded his weapon and waited to treat the guerrillas as he had the four-footed brutes. On second thought he

changed his mind, for if he opened fire, and one escaped, it would mean a night raid and death to the Weldons. Crouching low, Brant watched the two men as they emerged from the growth, a short distance above where the dogs had attempted to cross.

"But where be the pups? Why be they so mighty quiet? That pistol shootin' couldn't been agin them."

"It was close enough to be meant for us," said one. "Mebbe that handsome gal did the poppin'. Took my eye the minute I see her. Mighty likely lookin' piece of calico."

"T'other folks may be thinkin' the same way," gruffly reminded the other.

"Then forgit it, till the chief comes up. I'm cap'n of this outfit till then. You feel uppity?" The fellow glared savagely at his follower, who made no reply.

Brant realized the situation was vastly more serious than any attempt of conducting fugitives to the Union line could be. He called out:

"Walk along the bank. Your dogs are in the crick."

"Where be you? Who be you? Wher-ever you are, you're a liar."

The last was prompted by the hound crawling on his belly to his master. The other man advanced to the edge of the bank, glanced up and downstream, then cried:

"The dawgs be dead! I can see them in the ripples' downstream!"

"Don't you folks like to have your man-eaters killed?" jeered Brant.

"Step out an' show yerself, ye low-down yaller houn'," roared the infuriated owner of the pack.

"Come over and get me," challenged Brant.

"We'll do that little trick."

His companion quickly vanished. They fired blindly into the bush. Brant remained behind a sheltering oak until they had emptied their guns. Then he retreated. It was not his plan to leave any dead men on the bank of the creek to excite the wrath of Quantrell when he came. In falling back he did not attempt much stealth. He invited pursuit because he remembered the "likely lookin' piece of calico." For some minutes he listened without hearing anything from the bush-

whackers. Then sounded the voice of a man. He was cursing the horses as he hurried them downstream. Once the two men were in the saddle they splashed across the creek to comb the country.

BRANT bowed his head and ran swiftly for a quarter of a mile to the opening where he had left his horse. This was close to Tuggle Creek and the fish camp which he had passed a few hours back. He made direct for the camp, a dilapidated shanty which was almost entirely concealed by vines and bushes. Before the door, he found a huge negro armed with an upraised cudgel.

Reining in, Brant hurriedly explained:

"I'm for the North. Abe Lincoln. Men are hunting for you. I killed their dogs. Young missy sent me. Push on up the crick."

The hunted ones had heard the gunfire, and now they were hearing the burst of profanity on the stranger's back trail. The huge negro was convinced that the white man was friendly. He called softly. Two negroes timidly thrust their heads from cover, their eyes round with terror. Their leader spoke to them in a patois that Brant did not understand. The two leaped into the shallow stream and scrambled up the west bank. The giant followed, clinging to Brant's stirrup. When the growth along the west bank prevented this proximity he walked behind the horse. Brant motioned him to come alongside, and said:

"The men behind are on horses. They soon will be up with us. I'll lead them farther west if I can. Take your friends and hurry upstream, keeping to this crick. I've shot their big dogs. Only a hound left. They're after me. They don't know you're here."

The negro jerked his head in understanding, and sped forward after his companions. Brant turned at right angles, taking pains to leave a broad trail. Spurring across an opening, he halted in the shelter of some scrub pine and watched to make sure he still was being pursued. He glimpsed the hound running up the creek path, and then saw the horsemen taking the same course. He groaned. He had given Mary Weldon a promise. He had assured her he would save her black protégés, and it was maddening to think of

the poor creatures being run down and massacred.

He galloped furiously back to the Tug-
gle, intent on making good his word to the girl. Reaching the creek trail, he wheeled his mount and raced north. A tangle of logs at a wide bend caused him to slow down, and while thus cautiously maneuvering he glimpsed the two horsemen in single file ahead. Brant raised his gun and swung it down to knock the rear-most man from the saddle when his gesture was halted by an unexpected denouement.

Three pair of dusky arms shot from the thick cherry bushes to draw the two man-hunters from their saddles and into the growth. It was done so quickly that neither man could make any outcry. Brant lifted his horse into a gallop and raced along the path. He pulled up suddenly, dismounted and drove his horse ahead of him, with both knife and gun ready. The bushes just ahead of him violently parted and the head and shoulders of the black Hercules appeared. He was bleeding from a scalp wound, but his big white teeth were exposed in a wide grin.

"White man boss, yassir. Yo' lookum —daid." And he held up two fingers to indicate that the bushwhaskers had been exterminated.

DAZED by the unexpected conclusion of the affair, Brant cautiously entered the growth. He had advanced by a few yards, when he came to a small area where the bushes had been trampled. One sweeping glance at the small area was sufficient. With a shudder Brant turned back and beckoned the fugitives to follow him. He ordered the leader to secure the dead men's weapons, and to use the knives in digging shallow graves for the slain. He threw the guns into the creek and rode downstream a short distance while this gruesome work was being completed. Finally the tall black joined him, and with much bobbing of the head announced that the interment was finished. Brant went back and scattered dry leaves and twigs over the two mounds.

Then, gathering the blacks around him, Brant, indicating with his finger in the dust of the path, pointed out the route north they should travel. When he told them he would travel with them until dark

their joy could not be restrained. Afraid to shout and sing, they expressed their emotion by dancing.

They walked on each side of and behind his horse as he rode up the creek path. At sunset he halted and directed them to press on during the night, but to remain in hiding during the daytime. After they had departed he picketed his horse, laid down on his blanket and slept until an hour before sunrise.

The return journey was made in record time. He was well satisfied with what he had accomplished. Quantrell had lost two men, and the blacks were no longer a menace to the Weldons. There was nothing between him and a serious talk with the Weldon maid. He galloped up the east bank of the creek and reined in before the large log house. This was flanked on the south side by a vegetable garden. A few head of cattle grazed close by, mute testimony to Weldon's fear of raiders.

Mary Weldon fairly flew from the doorway; and Brant rejoiced over her eagerness to greet him. But she touched a finger to her lips and lifted her brows and, in a voice that carried, she announced:

"We always are glad to meet anyone who's heart is for the right. Doubly so when he's an old friend."

"It's fine to be seeing you, Miss Weldon," Brant replied awkwardly. And he glanced furtively about, wondering at the change in her manner.

An almost imperceptible movement of her head warned him against what he would find inside. For a moment she allowed her gaze to stray to a splendid black horse, grazing a few rods east of the cabin. Brant viewed the animal and envied the owner.

But the girl now was making for the doorway and beckoning him to follow. He strolled a few feet behind her, his thumbs hooked in his belt. He came to a halt in the doorway and stood motionless until his eyes were relieved of the sun glare. He found himself confronting a slim, dark faced man whose deepset eyes bored into him. Brant advanced briskly and shook hands with Weldon, who he believed was striving to conceal some strong emotion. Weldon, whose back was to the stranger, winked as he said:

"I'm always keen to see anyone who's

sound. I was telling my friend, Cap'n Black, that you are a friend of ours and a great friend of Dandy Jacques. Meet Cap'n Black. Cap'n, this is young Brant —Lige Brant. He's the young man I was speaking of. Missouri born and bred. Been up north digging gold for some time. Great friend of Dandy Jacques, smartest pilot on the Missouri."

Black shook hands quickly, eyed Brant sharply, and said:

"We know Jacques is all right. How do you do, sir? You're doing your part for the cause, I hope."

THE atmosphere was heavy with danger. Brant was quick to sense that much, but he could not understand why he should feel that way. Over the guest's shoulder he beheld Mary Weldon's eyes dilating with a terrible fear. Hedging for time, Brant fenced.

"I'm just back from hunting gold in the Rocky Mountains. Up in Montana. Came down on one of Captain La Barge's steam-boats. Jim Jacques is an old friend. I'm trying to find myself after a long absence."

"The work at hand should be plain," said Black. "A young man like you can go far, if he walks in the right direction. I am here, expecting to meet your friend, Jacques."

"I recently left him in St. Louis. He takes a week or two of city life so he may have something to remember when he's on the lonely reaches of the Upper Missouri."

"The young fool! The harvest is ripe, and he stays in town to play. See here—" now his tone was mandatory—"you came down with Jacques. You know what was the most important item in that boat's cargo?"

"Certainly. Two hundred thousand dollars worth of gold dust in one shipment. No knowing how much the miners brought down in their packs. Probably several hundred thousand. We were loaded to the guards, and nearly every man had made it rich."

With a deep intake of breath Captain Black slowly said:

"Hundreds of thousands in clean dust and nuggets!"

"Last season the *Luella* brought down a million and a quarter on one trip."

"God! We were asleep! How could

you know that? You were in the mines?"

"Jacques told me. But it was commonly known at Fort Benton."

"Many holdups, up there?" asked Black.

"Until the Plummer gang was run down and many were lynched, yes. Men had harder work getting their gold out of the country than they had in finding it."

"Plummer was a fool!" muttered Black.

"Too sure of himself. He was sheriff of two counties, while by law he could be sheriff of only one. His road agents were appointed deputy sheriffs to protect what they planned to steal."

"That was smart," said Black.

"They were all hanged," cheerfully added Brant. "Plummer offered several hundred thousand in dust if they'd let him go." Black said incredulously, "And they refused?"

"Plummer's dead. Lynched. But there's been a rare scramble for his wealth since he was hanged."

"Damnation! Don't keep yapping that word. Are you sure Jacques is coming down here?"

With a side glance at the girl Brant replied:

"I'm positive of it. He may arrive at any moment."

Weldon glanced at Black, and asked Brant, "By any chance did you see two horsemen near here when you came along? Some of the men here quit in a hurry."

"No. I saw several travelers on the way down. I recall no two men in particular. I saw none near this place."

"Each of them would have a belt full of weapons," supplemented Black.

"I think every man I saw was armed, but none so heavily as that. Friends of yours, Cap'n?"

With a quick flash of his teeth, Black replied:

"That depends on how well they have done their duty. . . . I own a plantation in southern Arkansas. They were chasing some runaway slaves of mine."

"I did not see them," repeated Brant. "But I heard gunfire in the west when nearing this place."

"The men the captain mentions were here three days. Had some dogs with them," Weldon explained.

Black stepped to the doorway and whistled shrilly. From the surrounding cover

more than a score of men stepped into view. Each man was heavily armed, ridiculously so, Brant thought. The captain waved his hand and the men vanished. Wheeling about, he said:

"For the good of the cause I must ask you to remain here until Jacques arrives."

"When and where did you meet my friend?" Brant asked curiously.

"In St. Louis. I was off duty, playing a bit. Drank too much. He saved me from being robbed, and worse. If he vouches for you, it's all right. The same goes for Weldon."

"The Weldons are old friends of mine. I used to live here. Now I come to pay them a short visit. But who are you, a stranger in this neighborhood, to tell me how long I shall stay? Or give orders to the Weldons?"

Thrusting his face close to Brant's the man replied:

"If you must know, I am Quantrell."

Although his face remained calm, Brant felt ice in his heart. Yet he managed to keep his voice even as he replied:

"I certainly shall remain here as long as it pleases you, sir."

NEXT morning the guerrilla leader and Brant ate breakfast with the Weldons. Quantrell's men bivouacked in the open beyond the stump fence, but were little in evidence so far as one could observe from the house. If not for the smoke of the small cooking fires, none in the vicinity of the clearing would have suspected their presence.

Brant knew Quantrell was a cattle thief, blackmailer, slave driver, kidnaper, and many times a murderer. He was the embodiment of all evil, and would be loyal to no friend, to no cause, except as it served his own convenience. Yet, in that little clearing, he was an autocrat. What also added to Brant's smoldering rage was the monster's steady gaze directed at Mary Weldon. The icy sparkle of his eyes was reptilian.

After the meal was finished Brant was more closely cross-examined. He got the impression that Quantrell intended to migrate to the gold fields of Montana. The amount of gold brought down on the steamers seemed to interest Quantrell greatly. In this connection he sought min-

ute information as to wooded banks along the lower part of the river. He also was deeply interested in the various overland routes.

"Jacques can tell you about the river traffic better than I can. I went up overland and have made the trip down but once," said Brant.

Quantrell nodded, staring steadily at the speaker. Brant doubted if his words had been heard. He believed that Quantrell's objective senses were submerged beneath rapidly forming plans for taking a rich toll from the mines, or the river craft. Brant ventured upon a recital of Henry Plummer's activities, but Quantrell cut him short.

"That man was a fool. Had his lap full of gold, and got himself hanged." With that he came to his feet as if moved by steel springs and, with a parting, staring glance at the girl, swaggered outdoors.

Red of face, Mary whispered:

"The negroes?"

Brant briefly related what had happened, speaking under his breath. Instantly Mary was alert against a new danger. She glanced from the window and beheld Quantrell crossing through the line of stumps to join his men. Turning back, she surprised Brant by demanding:

"Give me your guns!"

"If it comes to that, I can handle them better than you can, Mary."

"No, no! Hand them over. Quick! They must be cleaned. He's gone to send men in search of the missing men. You mentioned hearing gunfire in the west. I'm afraid. No, you must not come with me. Sit in the doorway, where he can see you. Take the two guns behind the door for your belt. I must work fast."

Brant caught something of her fear. He handed over his weapons and secured Weldon's two guns and took his place in the doorway. The place had become a trap. One might enter, but none could depart without Quantrell's permission. The man's bloody whimsies almost induced Brant to believe he was insane. No one knew, not even the members of the band, what terrible deed the erratic, but always deadly, mind would next urge. For the first time in his life Brant sensed the deadening feeling of utter helplessness. He heard the guerrillas laughing and talking as they

made their breakfast of Weldon's plump turkeys.

SUDDENLY he felt a pair of hands fumbling with his belt. He breathed in tremendous relief as he found them small and slim. Nor did he look over his shoulder as he felt the borrowed guns being removed and his own weapons being replaced. He heard the little sigh of relief as the exchange was finished. Without turning his head, and scarcely moving his lips, he murmured:

"The bravest girl in the whole United States—and the wisest."

He was sitting there, indolently resting his elbows on his knees, when a sudden commotion broke out in the guerrilla camp. At first he believed the ruffians were about to be attacked, and his heart beat high. Then one of the bearded men hoarsely shouted:

"Ben's found somethin'! It's somethin' mighty 'portant!"

Quantrell ordered his followers to be silent. The clearing became a stage set for rare drama. All in the cabin now heard it, a repetition of a shrill, ululating cry. Very soon the staccato hoofbeats of a galloping horse fell on the ear. Then a rider tore by the door of the cabin and raced straight for the camp. He began to speak loud and excitedly, but was quickly checked by his commander, and Mary and Brant could not hear the rest of what he said.

The recital ended, and there was a deep silence, until it was broken by Quantrell's trembling voice. Almost overcome by rage, his voice became falsetto in timber when he commanded his men to keep in camp. Then he stalked back to the cabin, Weldon walking before him, and a big, ragged haired fellow at his heels. Weldon's face was ghastly with fear. He called out to his daughter and Brant:

"A terrible crime has been done within a short distance of this cabin!"

"Close that yawp!" snarled Quantrell. "I'll do the talking. I may have to do some killing here." His eyes were feral as he glared over Weldon's shoulder at Brant, still sitting in the doorway.

Coming to a halt, his hands resting on two of the four guns in his belt, he demanded of Brant:

"Have any notion what one of my scouts has found?"

"I haven't the slightest idea. How could I know?"

"Don't you question me, damn you! My scout found two of my men, *dead*. Half buried. Been killed within twenty-four hours."

"But I have killed no one. I had nothing to do with their death," protested Brant.

"But you said you heard gunfire in the west."

"I repeat it. I heard guns fired. But if I'd been up to any killing I wouldn't likely have mentioned it."

Quantrell reached forward his left hand, his right gripping a gun, and yanked Brant's weapons from the belt. Without turning his head he called out:

"Here, Hockensmith."

THE big man took the guns as they were passed over his leader's shoulder. Quantrell barked:

"See if those guns have been fired recently."

Then did Brant appreciate the foresight of the girl. He awaited the man's verdict without betraying any concern. After a brief, yet thorough examination, Hockensmith gruffly reported:

"Mighty clean, Chief."

Without relaxing his watchfulness, Quantrell took the guns. He raised the hammers a notch, twirled the cylinders, and inserted a twisted piece of paper in the muzzles; but he was forced to confirm his subordinate's verdict.

Yet he was lustng to wreak vengeance on some mortal for the loss of his men. He was staring like a demon at Brant, undecided whether to hand back the guns, or use them on the owner, when the rider who had brought the news came running up the path, calling out:

"I forgot to say, Cap'n, that the boys wasn't shot. Just sorter pulled to pieces. They had their heads bashed in."

"Why didn't you report that in the first place?" demanded Quantrell. But his gaze wavered as he glanced around the clearing. "What mortal thing could manhandle such stout men to death?" he cried, without addressing any individual in particular.

Wheeling on the quaking Weldon, he fiercely demanded:

"What do you know about such devil's work? Ever hear of a man being killed in these parts as those men were killed?"

"No, siree! Nor anywhere else. Never in all my born days!"

Quantrell surveyed him with contempt, and snarled:

"It's plain you never could do it."

He switched his gaze to Brant, who appeared to be deeply interested, but in no degree perturbed. Quantrell handed back the guns, and savagely said:

"I'd give a thousand dollars to know how those men died. I know you couldn't have done it, Brant. You'd use your guns . . . Hockensmith, did you fetch back the boys' weapons?"

"Not a gun or a knife to be fetched."

Quantrell was enraged because he felt nonplused. Anything he did not understand was a potential peril. He swept his gaze along the edge of the clearing, and announced:

"Blood calls for blood. This neck of the woods needs a lesson. Hockensmith, take any four men you choose and ride out there and look for a trail. If you find one, follow it."

"The boys said they looked that ground over foot by foot, Cap'n. There was bushes beat down, like several men had had a rare fuss. But they couldn't find no boot tracks. There wan't no trail, except of two hossmen ridin' north. Looked like devil-ghost work."

"Would a ghost carry off all their guns and knives?" Yet the bandit leader was impressed by the mystery, and his gaze became furtive as he continued examining his surroundings. Then he suddenly asked Brant, "But you heard guns west of here?"

Brant nodded, and repeated:

"I heard guns. But I have no idea who fired them, or for what reason. It's as big a mystery to me as it is to you."

"Hockensmith, pick some of the boys and go out there and cast about very carefully. It's too damnable queer to leave behind us. After Ben made the find, he couldn't have searched very far, or very thorough."

Hockensmith ran to the camp and soon was riding away with three men trailing behind him. Quantrell continued nursing his aversion to what was inexplicable. He was afraid of mysteries. Todd had ousted him

from leadership once, and he feared Todd. He believed Anderson was hostile to him, and he was afraid of that stormy guerrilla. If not for Brant's testimony he might have credited the deaths to invisible powers. Had the dead men been killed by knife or gun he would have suspectd treachery on the part of those in his band who were planning to oust him from command. But the gunfire, testified to by Brant, and the seemingly impossible feat of an agency destroying two of his followers, all loyal to him, without using knife or bullet, left the worried leader in a rare mental fuddle. He told Brant:

"You're free to walk about. Don't stick here. You're safe with my men if you don't try to bolt."

"I don't want to bolt. I want to wait here until my friend, Dandy Jacques, comes. That's why I'm here—to meet him."

Jacques is smart," said Quantrell. "But go over and neighbor with the boys."

Brant wandered to the outlaws' camp and was treated civilly. Some of the men, having learned he was fresh from a long stay in the gold country, were avid for information. Many in the band realized that bushwhacking could not continue. Those who had planned to escape retribution for their many crimes by flight to Texas or Old Mexico were recasting their plans and were wishing themselves in the gold camps. Brant quickly perceived their trend of thought, and his description of the rich diggings caused more than one man to smack his bearded lips and avow his desire to be where fighting and killing was more richly rewarded.

Dissension had been smoldering in the band for some time. Anderson and Todd already were planning to oust Quantrell from command. The file of the organization feared the net was about to be drawn tightly about all free riders and wished to leave the border before they were caught in the inexorable roundup of all their kind. Quantrell was unique among all 'uthless men along the border. He hated the North, but was not deeply concerned over the welfare of the South. Above all else he hated Kansas. He hated the Confederate General Price. He despised Shelby. He had grown to hate the Confederacy, believing he had been denied official advancement because of Price's opposition.

His men knew much of all these hates. They also knew there was rivalry between Todd and Anderson, both seeking to supplant Quantrell. Such politics were deadly. The men knew Todd would side with Quantrell in order to oust Anderson from the band, and then would be the actual leader, governing through Quantrell. It was all too involved and vexatious to simple minds concentrated on the simple problems of killing and looting.

Because of this general unrest and fear for the immediate future, Brant found ready listeners to his stories. He described so vividly the richness of Last Chance and Alder gulches that his hearers licked their lips. Had either Quantrell, Anderson, or Todd at that time suggested a migration to the northern mines the exodus would have included practically every man.

One bearded guerrilla expressed it for all when he summed up their situation by saying—

"This damn stretch of border is gittin' too damn fussy."

NOR were the men slow to discuss the mysterious extermination of their two comrades. Some were superstitious, and, like their leader, they feared what they could not comprehend. Had the bodies been found shot through and slashed with bowie knives, there would have been no mystery. Brant, finding he was listened to respectfully and accepted as an authority on gold mining, would have preferred the camp to the cabin, if not for the presence of the girl. When he had ceased talking and the men congregated in little groups to discuss the gold country, he sauntered along the stump fence to the point nearest the cabin.

His steps were quickened by what seemed to be a shrill protest. He ran through a narrow opening of the rude barrier and came upon Mary Weldon, who was flushed of face and was staring wrathfully at Quantrell. The latter spun about on his heel and savagely commanded:

"Get back to the camp! This cabin's headquarters. Your place isn't here."

"But I heard the young lady cry out in fear—as if she had been scared by a snake."

"Never mind what you reckoned. Get back where you belong!"

Brant remained, his thumbs hooked in his belt, his gaze fixed on the guerrilla's long, slim hands. 1

"Get back across that fence!" again ordered Quantrell, his eyes widening in the killer's fixed stare.

"I'm Southern born," quietly replied Brant. "I don't belong to your outfit. And if the young lady is alarmed I am not taking any orders from you. Your men can easily kill me, although they'd rather I would guide them north to Montana. But before anyone can kill me I'll get you first. I know you're quick with a gun, but I'm quicker. I can beat you on the draw."

For a bit Brant believed it was to be a test between the guerrilla and himself. But Quantrell had problems sufficient to require the most subtle planning without being needlessly involved with an outsider. And he noted that the men in the camp were slowly drifting up to the fence. He harshly said:

"You make a boy's talk when you brag about gunplay. I'll overlook it this time. This young woman misunderstood me. And a Southern gentleman should always be ready to protect Southern women. You've made a mistake, but I believe you were honest in doing so. My protection is enough for any of this household. This young woman can be in no danger. Isn't that true, miss?"

"Oh, yes! Yes!" Mary was now afraid for Brant, whereas she had been afraid for herself.

"Having heard her say that, will you go back where you belong?" The snarl had returned to Quantrell's voice.

But Brant realized that he had advanced too far into the animosity of the killer to withdraw without catching a bullet in the back. His decision was quickly taken. Even if his presence spelled the ruthless killings of daughter and father, and himself, he knew he must not again leave the girl unprotected.

He drawled quietly:

"I am sticking here."

Quantrell inhaled deeply, crazy lights dancing in his eyes. Brant was alert, his hands nervous, eager to draw his guns and have it over with. He slowly closed his fingers more tightly about the two Navy Colts, the famous .44 being the favorite arm of the day.

When it seemed as if the impending tragedy must explode, there came an interruption—a shout from the creek path south of the cabin. Quantrell's nervous muscles relaxed, only to tighten instantly as he wondered what fortune, good or bad, was coming up behind him.

A HORSEMAN was approaching the cabin at a gallop, waving his hat and calling out greetings. Quantrell asked the girl:

"Miss Weldon, who comes?" He still faced Brant.

"A friend," she exclaimed, her frightened eyes lighting. "James Jacques, our friend!"

Not until then did Brant dare shift his gaze from the bushwhacker's guns. He lifted his head as the handsome, reckless rider came racing to the front of the big log cabin.

Dandy Jacques sensed the tensity of the two men's truculent bearing even before he was clear of the saddle. He stepped between the two and extended a hand to each, and genially greeted him.

"I trust that I find no misunderstanding here."

"Not on my part, Dandy. Your friend was unnecessarily alarmed."

"If he really was alarmed, Captain, then I am alarmed. He's too cool a hand to be alarmed needlessly. He and I were boys together. I know him and vouch for him. But surely it's only a misunderstanding. Just that, and nothing more."

"I want him to stay in the camp with my men."

With a reckless laugh Jacques countered:

"And I want him to stay here, with me."

"Jacques," somberly began Quantrell, "you can do almost anything with me. But even you can go only so far." His eyes frowned as he beheld his curious followers pressing closer.

"I live so much in a pilot house, Capt'n, and have my way when I give orders—give orders even to the captain of the boat—that I've got used to having my way." Then he turned to his friend, and asked, "What's your objection to staying in the camp, Lige?"

"I heard a woman call out, as if frightened," said Brant.

JACQUES' dark face was filled with sudden passion. His voice was a bit unsteady, as he told Quantrell:

"I vouch for Brant. He's my friend. I saved your life when a gun was at your head in a St. Louis barroom. You pretended to appreciate my intrusion then. But you don't like my intrusion now. Now I'm interfering with your business. I want my friend here where I can talk with him."

"I told him to stay in the camp, and there he stays," said Quantrell.

"And I know him too well to expect him to change his mind, once it's made up. But maybe I can change it for him, now that I am here. Maybe I can't. But whether you insist on his living on the other side of that stump fence, or try to kill him in his tracks, that decision will cost you and your outfit just a cool million dollars, Quantrell. Seems to be a question how high you value the having of your own way."

The men of the band were now separated from the three men and the maid only by the stump fence. They exchanged startled glances. Quantrell knew that gold had spoken to his followers more loudly, more compellingly, than ever he could speak. He licked his dry lips, and conceded:

"It's something to be talked over—this million dollars. If you vouch for Brant, he can stay where he pleases. We'll go inside the cabin and talk about that million."

From across the fence George Todd spoke up.

"We're all mighty keen to hear about that very same million, Cap'n." As he said this he swaggered through the opening, with the others quickly crowding behind him.

Quantrell swallowed his wrath and readily acquiesced:

"Very well. I intended to report fully to you if Jacques' talk amounted to anything. We'll all cross to t'other side of the stump line and hold a council. More room there."

"I'll be with you in just a few minutes, gentlemen," said Jacques. "I have a few messages for Brant from some of his old St. Louis friends. I must repeat them before I forget them."

With that he turned and led the way into the cabin, stepping aside at the door for the girl to precede him. Those outside saw him clap his hands on Brant's shoulders and shake him playfully and pretend to struggle with him. The men grinned at the foolishness of it as Brant stood motionless, while the river-pilot in pantomime pretended to be exerting himself to his utmost.

Then the two men dropped on to a couch of bearskins and the girl walked to the window across the room to give them privacy. Jacques' laughing lips quickly warned:

"This is a hell trap for you and Mary. I'm crossing over the stumps to keep them interested with fairy stories while you two light out. Yankee cavalry is within two miles of here, perhaps much closer. Scouting for Quantrell. Let Mary vamoose out the back window and have half a mile start of you down the crick. While waiting for her to get that lead, show yourself at the window and door, and look over your shoulder as if talking to her. Then you follow her."

"And you?"

"Oh, I stand ace high here. I'll come along. Before you pull out start a blaze in the fireplace. Empty a feather bed on it to make a smoke; empty anything. Then hustle out the back way and down the creek. The smoke should call the cavalry here. Once you catch up with Mary, go into snug hiding till the cavalry comes in and makes all safe for you two."

"But what of you, Dandy?" insisted Brant.

"Why, nothing. They'll believe my fairy story. I'll be all right. Now we mustn't talk any longer . . . Remember when our hats started sailing down the Missouri? Till we meet again, you old whelp."

The girl called out warningly:
"Something is happening."

Jacques stepped to her side and raised her hand to his lips, and assured:

"Nothing can happen to hurt us. Come Federal cavalry, come devil, we're all hunkydory." As he spoke he backed through the doorway, extravagantly flourishing his soft white hat and laughing as if much amused.

From the window, after gazing at the

hand he had kissed, the girl softly said:

"You've acted as if you were saying goodby."

"Till we meet again!" With another wide gesture of his hands, in which Brant read an imperious urging to immediate flight, Jacques briskly joined the silent, ominous group.

The girl had warned that something was happening. Despite his jaunty bearing Jacques was wondering what new dilemma was forward. Once he was with the bandits he took his cue from their focused eyes and beheld the men whom Quantrell had sent out on a second reconnaissance, returning. Todd hurriedly told him about the mysterious death of the two men. This party of investigators came up at a round gallop. Quantrell was very expectant on beholding their ill-repressed excitement. He barked:

"Well, what killed them?"

Hockensmith leaped to the ground and cried:

"Found nothin' new where our boys was kilt. But we found their dawgs, each one shot to death. By a revolver."

Quantrell's eyes glistened. He eagerly asked:

"You fetched back one of the bullets, of course?"

"Naw. Dawgs was kilt. Can't ye take my word for it? Why fetch back a bullet, or tote back a dead dawg?"

With a resigned sign of disgust, Quantrell said:

"That's why I am your leader. You have heads, but you don't think. The bullet would at least tell the caliber of the gun used." To his men he announced, "We can't feel safe for a minute until we know how our friends died."

"We can look into that later," spoke up George Todd. "Why bother about dead dawgs when a story about a million dollars is waiting to be told?"

Quantrell shifted his gaze to the cabin, and his eyes glittered as he beheld Brant standing in the doorway, his head turned as he talked over his shoulder. To Jacques he explained:

"Your friend Brant said he heard gunfire in the west while on his way here. I was at the cabin at the time. I heard none. What he heard must have been the shots that killed the dogs."

THE discovery of the slain dogs disturbed Quantrell more than he cared to have his followers realize. When he had the odds on his side, and the advantage of a surprise attack, he was a most effective killing machine. He was an excellent marksman, and the revolvers in his belt meant as many victims as their chambers held bullets.

The strength of his band varied from one to two score hard riders who were thoroughly familiar with the technique of border banditry. This maximum of strength increased and diminished, according to whether the band was riding to victory, or galloping from defeat. In the back of Quantrell's mind ever was the worry of being deposed. He slept apart from his followers, and the slightest sound would cause him to awaken and be on his guard.

He was a haunted man, and the dread of treachery, as well as the insane hatred of all things pertaining to the North, had created in his mind a demoniac lust for slaying. Now his suspicious mind was wondering if some of the Todd following had killed the dogs for some subtle reason, or whether some Northern sympathizer had exterminated the pack.

He could not rid his mind of the mystery: for a puzzle it was when the death of the two brigands, and the manner of their dying, was recalled. His first words, as the band squatted in a big circle, or reclined prostrate on the ground, harked back to what was troubling him. He said:

"Brant told me that he heard firing in the west." He turned to stare suspiciously at the lounging figure in the doorway. "I reckon I'll have him over here to see if he don't know how the dogs were killed."

"If he knew anything about the dead dogs he never would have let on that he had heard any firing," spoke up Jacques. "He don't know who killed the dogs any more than I do."

"Jacques, when business is brought up here, you keep that trap closed, or somebody will close it for you." Quantrell's eyes showed overmuch of the white as he shifted his gaze to stare steadily at La Barge's best pilot.

But the young man was not visibly impressed. He laughed good naturedly, and challenged:

"Here I am, surrounded by an ocean of Navy .44's, the guest of a certain Captain Black, whose life I saved in St. Louis. It needs but one pill from the doctor's medicine bag to snuff out my candle. The man who acts the doctor will always be remembered as firing the shot which cost him and his friends a cold million."

"No one here wants to kill a million dollars," harshly spoke up Todd. As he spoke he exchanged glances with Anderson.

Quantrell, through half closed lids, noticed his exchange of glances. He had known of their hostility to him for some time. He also had realized they were rivals for the leadership of the band. Thus far he had succeeded in playing one against the other. He was not yet ready for an open break with them. The odds were not in his favor. He faced Jacques and ordered:

"Let's hear your plan. I hope for your sake it is a good one. Hockensmith, post a man south and west, so there can be no surprise attack."

Hockensmith hurriedly named two men. But these remained sprawling on the ground, with no relish for missing the pilot's plan for making what would be the record breaking coup of all border thieving. Hockensmith grinned widely and tossed up his hands in a gesture of helplessness. Todd was quick to grasp an opportunity. He growled:

"Mattox, you take the southern post. Menk, you take the west."

THE band understood. Todd had been quick to accomplish what Quantrell had failed in. It gave him the edge on Anderson, his rival. The men named were Todd's friends and followers. They knew their interests were safe so long as he sat in the council circle. His order had been obeyed, whereas Quantrell's, indirectly given, had been ignored. Two other men volunteered under the simple impetus of Todd's questioning gaze. This incident angered both Quantrell and Anderson.

Quantrell bottled up his seething rage, occasioned by this minor insubordination. Anderson glowered heavily at his competitor. Quantrell's eyes were lurid as he turned to Jacques, and curtly said:

"We're listening."

Jacques swept his gaze over the reckless,

eager, bearded faces, hugged his knees, and began.

"I know where a million dollars in clean gold nuggets and dust is being held, awaiting shipment to Washington."

"Where?" fiercely demanded Todd.

For once Quantrell relished the young man's independence, who was now drawling:

"Suppose you let me go about it in my own way. When folks fire questions I get confused and am liable to say anything. There's no chance to bag it offhand." And, apparently not noticing Todd's malignant gaze, he plucked short tufts of grass and idly tossed them for the soft breeze to sport with and, incidentally, inform himself that a heavy smoke from the cabin chimney would be blown to the west and not over the wolfish men, and thereby call attention to the smudge Brant was to make. He leisurely continued:

"Most of you know I am a Missouri river pilot. I've fetched many fortunes from the mines through all the different kind of river dangers and many Injun attacks. I did my own work well for La Barge. He paid well for my services. I'd never scheme with any men to get that gold while it was on a La Barge boat. I'd fight to the death to protect it. But, after it's taken from the boat, it's a hoss of a different color. I've seen so much of gold that it's gotten to be common with me. I never think any more about it than I do about mining machinery, or any other freight."

"Yes, yes," impatiently prompted Quantrell. "Where is the gold? What's your plan?"

"I've got to tell this my own way, Cap'n, else I'll be forgetting things. The plan is all pictured in my mind. The sudden hold-up, the capture of the gold, and the escape with it."

"I'll attend to the last," curtly assured Quantrell. Anderson smiled grimly. Todd's brows went up in a query.

"To get clear of the border will be the hardest part of the job," Jacques continued. "Just as careful planning is necessary for holding on to the loot as in getting it out of the place where it is housed. As I size it up, it can be done without the loss of a life, and no hard riding except at the start."

HE paused, and idly tossed up more grass, and again noted that the breeze from the east was blowing a considerable volume of smoke from the cabin into the western woods. Clapping his hands sharply, and thereby focusing all the predatory eyes upon him, he leaned forward, and unconsciously added drama to the situation by lowering his voice as if fearful of being overheard. Fixing his gaze on Quantrell, he continued:

"The job must be done at night. There must be no confusion. No gunplay. No alarm will be given if we succeed. The actual capture of the gold can be made by four men. Two strong carts will be waiting in the alley beneath the window. The four men will lower the bags. Four men in the alley will place them in the carts and cover them with garden dressing. The drivers of the carts should be out of the town before the loss is known. They will travel south. The horsemen will gallop west. The entire plan must be understood by all before we stir a step. I've figured the plan all out, in every detail, while coming down the river.

"One, or several, prairie schooners must be camped at a certain point. The carts will be taken there and left. The drivers, taking the horses, will ride for cover. The carts will be burned, the iron work thrown into the crick. The schooners should go into camp there several days before the raid, perhaps two weeks. The women should do much washing. Their men will walk to town and buy supplies and ask questions as to the safest roads into southern Kansas. It would be a fine touch if we could have some little children in that train. The younger the better.

"Remember, after the surprise attack, with not a gun fired and not a man killed, the gold will be slowly taken to the camp and thrown out. The immigrants will be waiting to scoop it up and hide it in the wagonbeds. The horsemen will not pause for a moment. No more jogging along. They'll ride furiously south. After ten or a dozen miles, with the chase hot or cold, the band will split, no two men keeping together. Each horseman will know ahead just the place he is to go to and hide. After the excitement has died down a bit, and the chase has led to nowhere, the horsemen will make for the Injun Territory line,

traveling at a moderate rate of speed, but no two can travel together. The chase will be centered on the horsemen. They will meet at a rendezvous, the name being given each man on the night of the raid. After reaching the rendezvous the hiding place of the gold will be revealed, and the ride to it will be in a body.

"Now to return to the wagon train: the poor whites will not break camp until the chase is far ahead of them. Then it will proceed, traveling only in the daytime, and making poor headway. Everything about the train will suggest ill luck—no hard money, shiftlessness. The people of the train will wear homespun, and the men will carry long Kentucky rifles, and every man will have fair to middling whiskers. There will be no six-shooters in the train. If a posse comes up and asks questions, they're just pilgrims, and very timid. They've seen one band of horsemen riding off in the west. They'll beg the posse to keep along with them to protect them from Injuns and border ruffians. The posse never will quit the search for the lost million to defend any poor white trash. In this way the gold can be taken into Injun Territory."

JACQUES paused for breath, and noted that the smoke from the cabin chimney was heavier and darker, and was crawling higher into the heavens. But the structure did not appear to be on fire.

Every pair of eyes was fixed on Jacques. George Todd was the first to speak. He said:

"That outfit you describe never would be taken for pilgrims unless the women were real women. Mighty few of us could wear petticoats and fool anybody."

Jacques promptly replied:

"That's where Cap'n Quantrell comes in strong. From the dance halls of St. Louis he can get a dozen women to dress and act the part of immigrant women. They won't be let into the secret, and they can't blab what they don't know. They'll be given to think the packages of gold are so many packs of ammunition for the Confederacy. The cap'n will pick only women who are loyal to the South."

"I can get a hundred inside of twenty-four hours and go bail for the loyalty of every one," boasted Quantrell.

"It's a good workable scheme, with two

ifs against it. If it is not so strongly kept as to require a fight, and if we can get it out of Missouri. We'll arrange for the wagons and women at once. Now, where is the stuff stored, or hidden?"

"Pacific. Edge of Jefferson County," promptly answered Jacques. "Makes it only a short dash to where it can be passed over to the Indiana wagon train, in camp on some small crick."

"That chimblly's burnin' out!" cried a man.

"To hell with it!" growled Anderson. "The whole nest should be burned out. Anything else to tell?" The last was addressed to Jacques.

"Nothing that you don't know. Shelby and his cavalry has crossed this State, if we be in Arkansas, and has been turned back near St. Charles by the Federal General Carr. By this time he should be reinforced by Marmaduke. Missouri surely will be invaded. That'll take attention off from us. If our wagon train should be caught between old Rosecrans' men and our soldiers, our luck will be out."

"Why didn't you tell about Shelby in the first place?" fiercely demanded Quantrell. "If he's been licked, then we may be bagged."

"I suppose you knew what was commonly known from St. Louis to Springfield—from St. Charles to Injun Territory."

"Judas! The old man's cabin is afire!" cried one of the lookouts.

Q UANTRELL came to his feet slowly. Little murderous glints showed in his eyes.

"Why didn't your friend, or the girl, or the old man, sing out for us to help fight the fire, Jacques?"

Before Jacques could improvise an answer, the man on watch to the west called out:

"Tall feller ain't showed hisself at the door for some time. Must be lovin' the gal."

"I believe that something is wrong in there!" cried Jacques, and he made for the roaring cabin.

"Hold back there!" yelled Quantrell.

—Civil War Stories—

"If your friend's been up to any game, you pay for both."

Jacques ceased running and allowed Quantrell to range along beside him. Todd also held back, his eyes as hard as flints. The cabin now was hopelessly engulfed by the flames. The men ceased running, and several dropped on the ground to enjoy the spectacle. Suddenly one of them scrambled to his feet and hoarsely yelled:

"Hosses comin'! Heaps of 'em! Licky-terlarrup!"

All the guerrillas ran to their mounts and opened fire, even as they retreated, at the head of a column of Union cavalry, which burst through the growth which bordered the creek path. With yells which equaled the war-cry of the irregulars, the cavalry came on, firing their carbines. Jacques felt a terrible blow on his shoulder, and spun halfway around. He was hit again, and fell to the ground. Dimly he looked up and saw that the shots came from the retreating guerrillas.

Laboriously drawing a long gun, he summoned all his will power, and fired three shots rapidly before collapsing. Two guerrillas bowed to one side, and then pitched headlong from their saddles.

The guerrillas were in frantic flight, breaking up into twos and threes, and scurrying to cover. Jacques knew that he was badly wounded, although he felt no pain. His dull eyes lighted as he beheld Brant, bareback, racing toward him. Without waiting for his mount to come to a halt Brant leaped to the ground and kneeled beside his friend.

"Badly hurt, Dandy?" he hoarsely cried.

"Reckon I stopped right smart lead, Lige. Game worked fine. Told my million dollar fairy story."

"You ol' river pirate. A little lead can't kill you," Brant said relievedly as he tore open the flannel shirt and beheld the wound.

"Shucks, Lige. I knew Mary had picked you. I talked a bit with her. Couldn't let Quantrell kill Mary's beau."

"Dandy—I—"

"Hard a-port! Shut up! You don't owe me anything. I'm just paying back for that mad wolf—just as I promised. You ol' mountain man, you . . ."

The Golden Spy

By DEWITT SHANK

Golden-haired Virginia Carter fought on two fronts that spring of '64. One, the gay game of hearts in the glittering ballrooms of fashionable Washington. The other, the grim deadly struggle for military secrets—with a Yankee firing squad the penalty for discovery.

SERGEANT WILLIS CAWTHORN said sharply: "Hear that?" and the group of Confederate cavalrymen lounging around the rail-fence fire shot to their feet with the quickened reflexes of seasoned skirmishers. They listened in the direction of the Winchester Pike for a full minute, until Private William Braxton spoke up judiciously. He had the best pair of ears in the vedette.

"Hawses hoofs, all right, but ain't but two of 'em, Sarge."

"Reckon the pickets 'll attend to them," muttered Sergeant Cawthorn. He didn't like the vedette's station. The woods were too near on both sides of the pike. He'd been expecting somebody to come out of those woods all day.

The men went back to the fire. It was a cold snap for April, and the wind went right through their ragged gray uniforms. William Braxton began to tell about a Christmas Day dinner he'd had once on his grandfather's farm, down in Carolina.

The cavalry-picket bawled out the regulations and then an authoritative voice gave them the counter-sign. Two horses galloped toward the station through the late afternoon sunlight. One was a tall bay, mounted by a Confederate officer with an iron-gray mustache. A girl rode the other, a fine-quartered mare. She sat side-saddle with the grace of a born horsewoman.

Sergeant Cawthorn advanced and saluted. "Outpost of General Early, Sir," he said. "Yankee cavalry hidin' out in them woods tuh the right. Been expectin' 'em to brush with us all day."

The officer nodded. He said quietly to the girl: "Would you care to dismount and rest at the fire, Miss Carter? You have a long, wearisome journey ahead."

Sergeant Cawthorn, standing stiffly at attention, wondered: *Oh, my! Where's a beautiful young lady like her goin' alone?*

She was the loveliest thing the sergeant had ever seen. She had let her bonnet fall back over her shoulders, and her golden hair glinted in the sunlight like spun metal. She wore a dark blue cape and long, full, riding skirts.

The girl said in a warm, eager voice: "By riding all night I can reach the Potomac by daybreak. I must go on. You have been very kind to escort me, Colonel Hunter."

The Colonel bent over her hand with deep respect. He started to say: "Well, ma'am. . . ."

A rattle of carbines broke out of the woods off to the right, and as their heads turned they saw a body of Yankee cavalry come spurring across the plowed field, waving their sabers and cheering hoarsely. Carbines were firing out of the woods regularly, and lead whistled overhead.

". . . Hawses!" yelled Sergeant Cawthorn. The vedette was throwing itself into the saddle as one man. The pickets fired one burst and came riding in to the fire.

The Colonel's horse reared. He said anxiously: "Ma'am, if you are caught with Confederate papers, it means. . . . Ma'am! Ride your horse out of here just as fast as you can! Make for those woods back of us. Burn those papers soon as you can."

He lifted his hat to her and spurred his horse to where the vedette waited for him. "Up an' at 'em, boys!" he cried, waving his sword. The vedette yelped wildly, and swept forward to meet the Yankee attack.

Virginia Carter laid the gad to the mare and went galloping across the field away from the action. When she looked back all she could see was a confused picture of flashing sabers, rearing, pawing horses, and scattered puffs of white smoke. Then a horseman broke away from the main



melee and set out after her. He had his carbine to his shoulder, and as she watched him, fascinated, smoke mushroomed from the muzzle and a moment later she heard the crack of the gun. *He doesn't know I'm a woman*, she thought. *He thinks I'm carrying dispatches*.

"Go, Lucy!" she cried to the mare. Then she saw that the Colonel had disengaged himself from the fight and was jolting his horse after the Yankee cavalryman. The bay was long-limbed and fleet; he rapidly overhauled the girl's pursuer. This was the first skirmish Virginia Carter had ever seen, and she wondered how the Colonel would deal with his man. She learned rapidly. The bay pulled close behind the Yankee who, hearing his pursuer, turned and snapped a shot with his pistol. But the Colonel's pistol went off a split second sooner. The Yankee cavalryman threw up both arms and tumbled off his horse.

"Ride, girl!" shouted the Colonel. He turned the bay and rode back to the skirmish. Virginia Carter shook the gad at the mare and galloped on, wondering if she would faint. Oh, war was horrible, brutal! Even the Richmond hospitals were not as cruel as this. How long had this terrible killing been going on?

She entered the woods and rode for a mile. The sounds of the skirmish faded in the distance. In a secluded spot she stopped the mare and opened her reticule. She drew out a sheaf of papers. One of the papers read:

This pass enables (Miss) Virginia Carter to pass any lines in the Confederacy, and also requests that all possible assistance be given her.

ROBT. E. LEE.

She held a flame to the papers, and they fell blazing to the ground. The pass would be of no further assistance to her.

"Marse Robert wouldn't want to sign my death-warrant," Virginia Carter told herself gravely. She took notice of the direction of the fading sun, and shook the mare into a gallop.

THE boy holding the horse's bridle said: "You'll hev to go the rest of the way on foot, ma'am."

Virginia Carter said wearily: "Is it far? I have ridden all night."

"No, ma'am," the boy answered. "The skiff is moored a hundred yards from here. Beggin' yore pardon, ma'am, if you'll get down I'll hide the mare an' we'll make tracks for the river."

The girl slid down, and drew her cape closer around her. It was barely dawn, a damp, depressing grayness covered everything. She trembled from weariness. The boy hid the tired horse behind a clump of bushes, and came running after her in his bare feet to show her the faint trail to the river.

The smell of river-water came to her nostrils. A moment later they stood on the bank of the Potomac.

"You'll find a kerridge waitin' you on the other side," the boy said. "Reckon we ought to hurry. Don't want no Yankee patrollers ketchin' that mare."

They got into the small skiff and the boy shoved off and began rowing. For a moment a dreadful anxiety seized the girl. Suppose Yankees had captured the carriage and were waiting for her on the Federal side. Suppose they had learned about Mary Prentice. But then she tossed her head bravely. This wasn't the first time she'd been in Yankee country, and it wouldn't be the last. She rehearsed her story for a last time. *Richmond family but sympathetic to North . . . Confiscation of their property by Rebels . . . Relatives in North, among them Mrs. William Prentice, wife of the head of the English Trade Commission, living in Georgetown . . . "I'm sure, Sir . . ."* (drop your eyes shyly and make your voice throb) *" . . . that my aunt can explain everything. . . ."*

"H'yar we are, ma'am," said the boy suddenly. He ran the skiff up to the shore and leaped out and made it fast. He whistled sharply three times. Virginia Carter made her way to the bow of the boat and the boy helped her up to the bank. An answering whistle came out of the woods, and a moment later a carriage appeared, driven by an old Negro wearing a beaver hat on his cotton head.

He came down to the river road and stopped. Worry was writ large over his black, kindly countenance. "Git in, Missie!" he whispered sharply. "Yankee paterollers all aroun' us!"

Virginia Carter gathered up her skirts and climbed in.

"God bless you, ma'am," the barefooted boy said suddenly. The black coachman shook up the horses and they pulled away toward Washington.

The girl thrust her head from the carriage. "Do you know where to go?"

"We'uns goin' to Miz William Prentice, Geo'getown, jes' as fast as these horses kin take us, ma'am. I'se Peter Jackson, Miz Prentice's ol' butler."

"That's good," Virginia Carter said softly. She sank back in the carriage. Soon she'd be safe with Mary Prentice.

II

WAshington, in the spring of 1864, was a city divided against itself. There was opposition not only to the person of Mr. Lincoln, but for the cause of the Union. A cultured section of society, spiritually akin to the aristocratic Southern planters, detested the gaunt Illinoisian and were determined to supplant him. Sedition ran rife.

In many of the great homes of Washington and Georgetown, talk turned to peace. There had been draft riots in New York, and in the field Union arms had suffered frequent defeat. All Mr. Lincoln's generals had failed him, until now he had brought an obscure man named U. S. Grant from the Western battlefields and made him General-in-Chief of the armies of the United States. All Washington laughed at the story of the way the general had arrived at Willard's Hotel, an inconspicuous figure in a shabby uniform with four stars sewed to the collar, and had been assigned to a mean room on the top floor. Then the dashing hotel-clerk had nearly fainted when he saw the signature, "U. S. Grant and son, Galena, Ill."

In none of the aristocratic mansions was the laughter greater than at Mary Prentice's. Washington knew her as the wife of William Prentice, an obscure man who was supposed to be head of an English commission in America, but more important, Mary Prentice was known as one of the three best hostesses in the District. The balls and levees at the great white colonial house on the hill in Georgetown attracted many of the most important peo-

ple in Washington. General McClellan came there often, as did other people who were politically on the other side of the fence from Mr. Lincoln.

But what people did not know was that the small, bustling, black-eyed woman was Richmond born and bred, and that her removal to England and marriage to an Englishman had not changed her passionate love for the South. They did not know that keen-eyed confederate agents used her home as a meeting-place and base of operations and that she co-operated with them to her fullest ability.

She had known Virginia Carter as a little girl in taffy-colored pig-tails.

"My dear," she said gaily, "As your alleged aunt I must caution you that these young officers are heart-breakers. You must not let any of them turn your head."

They were sitting on the Louis Quatorze bed in the girl's room. Virginia Carter had slept all day. She said now, yawning lazily: "I was brought up on a diet of Richmond beaux, Mary darling. Are Yankees so much worse?"

Mary Prentice smiled. Then she leaned forward and whispered: "Speaking of beaux, Billy Taliaferro will be at the ball tonight. He is the person you are to contact. He is on General Grant's staff. Have you heard of Grant, down there in Dixie? He's the one who took Vicksburg, when everybody said it couldn't be taken. Law, he doesn't look any more like a general than I do! But they do say Abe Lincoln has great confidence in him."

Virginia Carter said dreamily: "I haven't seen Billy Taliaferro for four years—since before the war started. He and I were beaux, before he went away to the University. Do you reckon he's changed much?"

"He's the best Confederate operator in the North, Missie," said Mary Prentice. "Half the leaks from Union Headquarters are due to him. After we win the war, he's sure to receive recognition from our government."

Virginia Carter said: "Yes, we must win out in the end. But, oh, my dear! So many brave men are dying. Is any cause worth this horrible killing?" In her mind she was seeing the Colonel ride up behind the Yankee and fire his pistol. She shuddered.

"Law, Missie," sighed Mary Prentice. "We all feel the same." She got up briskly, an energetic, capable little woman, and dabbed at her eyes. "Haven't we all lost relatives and friends? Yancey fell at Gettysburg. Did you know? He was my favorite brother."

She sniffled once, then went on bravely: "Now, Virginia, if you are going to charm Northern hearts, you must be properly gowned. These are the latest rage in London. . . ."

She brought out silk and magenta and brocade ball-gowns—enough to overwhelm the heart of a Southern girl who had starved for such things three long years. The two women fell to plotting over their plan of action for the great ball Mary Prentice was having that very night. This was their battle-front—and they were experienced skirmishers.

LIEUTENANT BILLY TALIAFERRO whispered: "Careful what you say. Anything may be overheard. Lordy, you're good-looking, Virginia Carter! Am I still your beau?"

The musicians broke into the dreamy strains of "Old Folks at Home" and couples began to take the floor. Virginia Carter wore a brocade dress with huge hoops. She and handsome, boyish Billy Taliaferro swung into a waltz.

" . . . All de world am sad an' weary. . . ."

As her childhood beau whirled her about the floor, Virginia Carter had opportunity to see every aspect of the ball-room. Handsome Yankee officers in blue uniform and tarnished gold braid danced with dazzling belles dressed in all their finery. Through the door of the refreshment room she could see blue figures with glittering sabers handing out punch to giggling, lace-panteletted daughters of Washington society.

In the hall, Mary Prentice still received late arrivals. A handsome, magnetic man came in and was warmly greeted by Mary. "Who is that man?" whispered Virginia Carter. Billy Taliaferro swooped and half-turned.

"That's Gen'ral George McClellan," he murmured. His lips curved slightly. "Darling of the Copperheads and opponent of Mr. Lincoln's policies. He comes here often."

The music came to a close. Billy Taliaferro handed her out of a side door leading to the garden. The night was cool and spring-like. He led her to a deserted corner of the garden, where they could speak in privacy.

"Little Virginia Carter, a-playin' spy in the midst of the Yankees," he whispered tenderly. "Lordy, girl, be careful. The Yankees are trying desperately to stop leaks. Their agents are scattered everywhere. What information have you for me?"

"General Lee must know about Grant's movements this spring, also the disposition of the other Union troops—especially in the Valley of Virginia. Everywhere one hears that a gigantic campaign is to get under way soon."

"Yes, I've been trying to uncover something." Billy Taliaferro took both her hands with a smile. "We must keep constant contact with each other. It will be my duty to see you every day, and act the love-smitten cavalier."

"I hope you won't find your duty too arduous, sir," Virginia Carter said, dimpling.

Billy Taliaferro laughed. "Duty was never more enjoyable, ma'am."

The musicians were swinging into the rollicking strains of "Turkey in the Straw." He took Virginia Carter's arm. "Remember how we used to dance this, Virginia?" The girl smiled. They sauntered toward the great house.

An indistinct figure came out of one of the paths in the garden. "If it isn't Lieutenant Taliaferro an' the charming young lady from Richmond! Pleased to meet you, ma'am."

The man bowed low, and came forward. The light fell on his face and Virginia Carter felt an instinctive feeling of dread. Without knowing anything about him, she knew he was a man-hunter. He had the expression of a man-hunter, hawkish nose, pale eyes. At this moment he had a Wheeling stogie clamped in the corner of his thin, expressionless mouth.

Billy Taliaferro said quietly: "Miss Carter, this is Mister Claude Mack." His voice was smooth, unhurried; and its smoothness carried warning of secret danger. "Mister Mack is an army contractor from New York—a pillar of the Union, I

might say. An army travels on its stomach, you know."

Virginia Carter saw that the man was dressed in a frock coat and he wore a string tie. She said clearly:

"I'm sure Mister Mack's sacrifices for the Union have been equal to that of any soldier, Lieutenant Taliaferro. Haven't we this dance, sir?"

THE man in the frock coat barred the path without seeming to. "Now, Miss Carter, I know we contractors have a bad reputation, but—"

Virginia Carter spoke haughtily. "My lack of interest in army contractors is truly wonderful, sir. If you will let us pass . . ."

"Don't they have contractors in Richmond, Va., ma'am?" He made no effort to move from their path.

Billy Taliaferro took a hand. He said most gently: "Miss Carter has just escaped from the clutches of the Rebels, sir. She is still unnerved from her experiences and would rather not speak of them. Beggin' your pardon, sir, I have this dance with Miss Carter."

Claude Mack started to say, "Very pretty, Lieutenant—" Billy Taliaferro said fiercely: "By the mighty, sir! I said I have this dance with Miss Carter, an' I don't intend it shall be wasted in idle gossip in a garden foot-path. Out of our way, sir."

The contractor shifted his stogie and purred: "Not wasted, Lieutenant—"

Billy Taliaferro stepped forward, fists clenched. But Claude Mack stepped back. "Sorry, Lieutenant. My error. I only wanted to know a little something about conditions below the lines. I—"

Virginia Carter took Taliaferro's arm and swept by indignantly, golden head held high. Claude Mack removed his stogie from his mouth and stood looking at it reflectively.

They went inside and danced.

"Oh, Billy, I was so afraid!" whispered Virginia Carter. "Something about that man gives me the shivers."

Billy Taliaferro said grimly: "Your intuitions are correct, ma'am. That man is one of the heads of the Pinkerton Secret Service, and the most dangerous man in Washington."

"Do you reckon he suspects us?"

"No, except that he suspects every living creature. Avoid him, if you can, Virginia. And treat him just as haughtily as you wish. He'll expect it from a Southern belle."

The dance ended. Billy Taliaferro guided her off the floor to the refreshment room. Mary Prentice hustled up energetically.

"My dear, I want you to meet General McClellan. He has just announced that he will be an opponent of Abe Lincoln in the November elections. Excuse us, Lieutenant."

Taliaferro bowed. "Not at all, ma'am."

Mary Prentice whispered as they walked toward the library: "I want you to meet some of the influential Yankees, my dear. You are charming in that magenta, Virginia. You'll be the belle of Washington before long."

"I've already met one Yankee," the girl murmured. "A terrible person with no manners. Billy says he's a Pinkerton spy."

"Claude Mack?" asked Mary Prentice excitedly. "Law, Missie, watch your step around him! He's trapped five of our operators in the last month. Does he suspect you?"

"Billy says he's suspicious of everybody. I was very uppity with him."

They were at the entrance to the library. General McClellan was just relating the latest anecdote concerning Mr. Lincoln to an admiring audience of well-dressed civilians. Mary Prentice waited until the laughter died away, then led Virginia Carter forward.

"General McClellan, this is my niece, Virginia Carter, who's just escaped after harrowing experiences at the hands of the Rebels in Richmond."

The great man bowed. "I take it your family's sympathies lie on the side of the North, Miss Carter?"

Virginia Carter said shyly: "Our family has lost everything, sir. Our home, retainers, and personal belongings—all have gone into the hands of the Rebels."

General McClellan sighed and said: "Yes, this war has been a calamity to all sides. If I am elected President of this great land I shall see that the struggle now raging between brothers is brought to an end. We should seek to heal as well as to conquer. Miss Carter, perhaps in time

your home in Richmond may be restored to you. In the meanwhile I hope your stay with your aunt may erase your unhappy memories of the tribulations of war."

"Thank you, sir," said Virginia Carter, curtseying. Mary Prentice took her by the arm and led her into the refreshment room.

"**Y**OU did splendidly, dear," she said with a squeeze, and laughed. For three young men in well-fitting frock coats were hurrying from the library, eyes eagerly searching. They saw Virginia Carter and their faces lighted up. But before they could reach her, a tall figure in a captain's uniform came between and said in clear Yankee accents: "Mary Prentice, introduce me to your charming niece before those dandies monopolize her."

"Miss Virginia Carter of Richmond, meet Captain Clay Browning," said Mary Prentice helplessly. And then Virginia Carter was whirling lightly in the firm clasp of the tall stranger, with only a casual "I am pleased to make your acquaintance, ma'am," lingering in her ears.

But she was too experienced a campaigner to be swept off her feet in such a manner. "Law, sir," she gasped, "have I been abducted for ransom? What excuse have you to offer for—"

"For stealing the prettiest girl on the floor?" he suggested gravely. "No, ma'am, I have not. Except that my mother, who was a great admirer of Shakespeare, used to tell me that faint heart ne'er won fair lady."

She said with a flash of blue eyes: "Did your mother also tell you that ladies sometimes like to have their wishes consulted, Captain Browning?" She looked at his face, half in vexation and half in curiosity. He was different from the Southern boys she had known. His face was handsome, sun-bronzed and lean along the jaws. She guessed he came from somewhere in the Northwest—Illinois, perhaps.

He was saying, in a voice that held hidden laughter: "Now, ma'am, you know you'd have been bored to death with those fops. I watched them when you were being introduced to General McClellan. When they heard that you were Richmond born and bred their eyes popped like bullfrogs. Why, ma'am, although the North

is at war with the South, half the people in this room admire and imitate Southern manners. You'd have been 'yo'-alled' and 'clare to goodness' within an inch of your life!"

In spite of herself, Virginia Carter had to laugh. "Do you find Southern customs so distasteful, sir?"

He spoke with a touch of seriousness. "No, ma'am. The South has a very fine culture. It has its own definite place in our country. But it belongs in the country, not out of it. As Mr. Lincoln has said, 'We must save the Union.'"

Virginia Carter swallowed an indignant reply. She thought fiercely: *I'd like to scratch his eyes out! Save the Union, indeed, when you have to kill off our best blood to do it! What right have you to coerce us to belong to a Union we cannot respect!*

The dance came to an end, relieving her of the necessity of answering. The tall captain guided her adroitly toward the veranda before several disappointed young bachelors could intercept them. Virginia Carter was piqued by this masterful Yankee. The idea of taking him down a notch or two appealed to her mightily.

She stepped to the rail of the veranda and breathed the fresh night air. On the other side of Rock Creek was Washington proper; she could see a few faint lights from the government buildings. She wondered if Abe Lincoln was still up hatching some meanness for the South.

"It's a glorious night," the tall man at her side said quietly. "What a pity that brave men on both sides have to be dying!"

Her throat was constricted with emotion. She forced herself to say lightly: "Why, Captain Browning, you seem to show almost as much concern for Rebel troops as—our own. You're almost as bad as a Copperhead."

He said: "Ma'am, there are brave men and good men in the South as well as the North. I took part in the actions at Chancellorsville and Gettysburg and I have nothing but respect for Southern soldiers."

"Oh, dear!" gasped Virginia Carter. Tears welled in her eyes. She had played her part cleverly in the face of danger, had handled a Pinkerton agent with arrogance and had shyly greeted a great general; but now Virginia Carter was in dan-

ger of giving way to her emotions. Clay Browning's show of sympathy was more than she could bear.

She said hurriedly: "You must excuse me, Captain Browning. I am suddenly faint. Thank you kindly for the dance, sir. . . ." She turned and ran blindly inside the house.

HE had intended to go to her room, but the staircase to the upper house was in full sight of the ball-room floor. She changed her mind and hurried along the hall to the side veranda, which gave on to the garden. If she had a few moments to recover her composure before returning to the floor, she could weather this attack of nerves.

The moon shone with a silvery light over the garden. From the distant ball-room came the muted sound of a polka. Virginia Carter sighed deeply and dabbed at her eyes. She had been under too much of a strain the past twenty-four hours.

She thought to walk a little in the quiet garden. Holding up her hoops, she slipped down the veranda steps to the garden-path. How lovely and peaceful it was! The war seemed far away.

"Good evening, ma'am . . ." hummed the voice at her elbow. She knew without turning who it was; it seemed only a bad dream that Claude Mack, man-hunter and Pinkerton agent, should be with her here.

She turned and faced him. His face was half hidden in the gloom of the garden, but she could see the eager, expectant look in his eyes. He still chewed on the unlighted stogie. She called upon her reserves.

"To what do I owe this intrusion . . .?" she began scornfully. But her voice broke. She could not keep the quaver entirely suppressed.

"Tha-at's better," said Claude Mack. "I like 'em better when they're not so highty-tighty. Now, ma'am, I missed part of your little story to Gen'ral McClellan. Just how were you able to escape from the Rebels an' ride over a hundred miles to Washington?"

"Go away," stormed Virginia Carter. She had recovered some of her composure. "Please go away."

"Now, ma'am—"

"When the lady asks you to go away, I'd pick right up and go away," said Clay

Browning. He had come down soundlessly from the side veranda and stood a little in front of Virginia Carter.

"Now, Cap'n—don't go gettin' on your high horse. I'm in pursuit of my duty."

Clay Browning said in even tones: "Damn your duty."

The Pinkerton agent said in shocked tones: "Why, Cap'n, is that any way to talk? I'm just checkin' on the young lady's story. Tell the truth, it sounds a little fishy to me. I wouldn't be surprised if she was a spy for the Johnny Rebs. Pretty enough."

If they stood her in front of a wall and shot her, Virginia Carter was going to do one thing. She stepped forward and slapped Claude Mack solidly across the face. She sobbed.

"There!" Inspiration came to her aid. "How dare you call me a Rebel spy! After I've had such a terrible time escaping. You—you're the meanest man I've ever seen. Why, somebody ought to call you out . . ."

"They don't call them out so frequent above the Mason-Dixon line, ma'am," said Clay Browning with a little chuckle. "However, I think you'll always find someone to protect you." His voice hardened as he turned to Claude Mack. "Duty has its limits, Mister. You've no right to question a girl who's exhausted and nervous."

The Pinkerton agent jerked the cigar from his mouth with a decisive motion. "I'll give the orders around here, Cap'n Browning. Washington's full enough with Southern sympathizers without letting this Miss come in here with no more than a how-d'you-do. Now, ma'am, answer my question. How did you—"

"She's not answering any more questions tonight," said Clay Browning.

Claude Mack jammed his stogie savagely into his mouth. He barked sharply: "Cap'n Browning, as your superior officer, I order you to remain quiet. I am going to grill this girl here and now, and you will be my witness."

"I'll see you in hell first," said Clay Browning.

He took the girl's arm and started toward the veranda. The agent moved to block their path. Browning was like a tiger. He disengaged himself from the girl's arm and was on Mack in one motion.

There was a dull *thock!* and Mack went backwards on the garden path. Browning stood looking at him. Mack did not move.

Virginia Carter took Browning's arm shyly. "I'd like to go in, Captain Browning."

Clay Browning said: "Yes, ma'am. Right away, ma'am." He chuckled and bent over Mack's recumbent form. He picked up something from the garden path and placed it in the agent's mouth. It was the Wheeling stogie. It projected upward at a ludicrous angle.

"I thought Mister Mack would want his segar," drawled Clay Browning. "I never saw him without it."

THEY walked toward the veranda. At the steps the girl turned. She said, her voice trembling:

"I don't know how I can ever thank you, Captain Browning—"

"Shucks, ma'am, it wasn't anything. I only hope you're not bothered any more. Mister Mack apparently is the victim of a spy-scare. He seized on the fact of your Richmond birth to question you, ma'am."

The veranda door opened and an officer came hurrying out. "Virginia Carter," said Billy Taliaferro accusingly, "I've been looking . . ." He broke off short as he saw Clay Browning.

"Beg your pardon, sir. I thought Miss Carter was alone."

"Quite all right, Lieutenant. We were just taking the air."

Billy Taliaferro's eyes told her that he wanted to speak to her. She said swiftly:

"I declare I'm sorry, Captain Browning, but I had promised this dance to Lieutenant Taliaferro."

The captain bowed low. "Of course, Miss Carter."

She and Billy Taliaferro hurried inside. In the great ball-room they swung into the dance. Billy Taliaferro's voice, low and intense, came to her above the fiddles' playing. "What did Captain Browning want to know?"

"Nothing, Billy. I declare, he picked me right off my feet and made me dance with him. But he saved me from that awful— Why, Billy? Is he—"

Billy Taliaferro whispered grimly: "Captain Browning has been detailed to special duty at headquarters because of a

fine record as a scout. He's supposed to stop leaks of Union operations, working under that Pinkerton agent. He's a spy-hunter, Virginia, and a mighty capable one, too, if I guess aright!"

III

IN the gay, careless circles of Washington society Virginia Carter moved like a golden butterfly. She danced and flirted and gossipped idly with young Yankee officers about Grant's coming campaign against Lee. Mrs. Prentice's niece became known as one of the most popular belles in Washington.

It was rumored a number of bachelors were losing their hearts over her. Also two officers had the inside track—young Lieutenant Taliaferro and the tall, smiling, imperturbable Captain Browning.

She hated Captain Browning, Virginia Carter told herself. Yankee spy! She knew that one slip on her part would send them all sliding into oblivion.

At the balls and levees he would come up to ask her for a dance, bending politely over her hand. And she would smile at him and pretend to flirt while her heart was hammering at her ribs.

"Why, ma'am, you are positively pink with excitement. May I dare hope that I am the cause of your delicious confusion?"

She would flick her wisp of a handkerchief in his face playfully. "Lieutenant Taliaferro has just come in the door, sir. Don't you simply adore this polka, Captain Browning . . . ?"

Or—riding horseback with Billy Taliaferro, they would meet Captain Browning cantering up to the Prentice house. The officers would nod stiffly at each other, while Virginia Carter chattered on gaily, smiling at both.

She rode often with Billy Taliaferro. A few days after her arrival at Mary Prentice's, he had told her mysteriously: "We're going somewhere this afternoon. Act as though we're just going out for a canter."

They had ridden out the Charles Town Pike about three miles, then Billy Taliaferro had swung off the road and followed what seemed to be a faint logging trail. It led to a ramshackle house in the middle of a clearing in the Virginia woods. Billy Taliaferro had whistled sharply, and

a man had come warily to the door. Then they had ridden up to the weatherbeaten house.

It was a relay station, Virginia Carter learned. Agents stationed in the North passed on information which was sent by dispatch rider to Richmond headquarters. Agents traveling northward used the house for an overnight abode and for a place of safety. And, sometimes, a Confederate agent escaped a Pinkerton trap at Yankee headquarters by the skin of his teeth and made his way South by stealth and by night, resting at the relay station before the last dash across the Potomac.

There was such an one when Virginia Carter first visited the station with Billy Taliaferro. A man with two days' growth of beard and the bedraggled look of a man who has slept in the woods. His name was Webb Turner, and he had barely missed being shot.

"Thet consarned—beggin' your pardon, ma'am—Claude Mack! He ain't human. I thought I'd covered my tracks complete, but he got me from the other end. The Yanks have got spies in Richmond, too, an' they know all the moves we make, seems like. Got five of our men, Taliaferro. They took 'em out one at a time an' shot—"

Billy Taliaferro drawled easily: "Well, Mack will get his come-uppance one of these days." His half-angry glance at Turner was not lost on Virginia Carter. Poor dear, he wanted to keep the harsh realities of their dangerous position away from her. She said brightly:

"How did you get away, Mister Turner?"

"I had some Yankee gold, ma'am. One of the guards was willing to take a knot on his head for it."

"Well, Mack is in New York on some business connected with the draft riots," said Billy Taliaferro. "Maybe some Irishman will bash him with a brick."

"He's a man-hunter," said Webb Turner. He shook his head. "He ain't human."

They rode homeward through the April afternoon. Green foliage faintly tinted the Virginia woods. The smell of spring was in the air. The war seemed far away. Billy Taliaferro said lazily:

"Remember the time I raced you from

the Breckinridge place to your front gate? And you won because I fell off my pony and broke my arm?"

"I'll beat you again," said Virginia Carter promptly.

They whipped the horses into a gallop and raced all the way in to the Prentice house, pulling up at the stables in a whirl of excitement and laughter. Billy Taliaferro's rangy three-year-old, requisitioned from a Kentucky stock-farm, beat Virginia Carter's mount by three lengths.

"Darn this side-saddle," said Virginia Carter in vexation.

GRANT was conferring with Mr. Lincoln every day. His army, the strongest wing under Meade, was ready for the field. And in Richmond, Robert E. Lee waited with his gaunt, war-tested veterans. It seemed that both forces were gathering up their strength for a decisive blow. The month of April ran on.

Virginia Carter waited by the paddock fence for Billy Taliaferro. She had an engagement to ride that afternoon, and had come down to the stables early to look at a new colt. She flicked a gad idly against one boot, and wondered why Billy was not on time. In the distance she heard a darkie's voice remonstrating. She recognized Peter Jackson's scandalized tones.

"... 'clare to goodness, Miz Carter ain't—"

A white man's voice grated harshly, "Out of my way! She's here, all right. If you know what's good for you, you'll keep your nose out of this!"

She knew that voice. She'd know it anywhere. Then she turned and saw Claude Mack coming swiftly toward her across the exercise yard, a look of triumph in his pale eyes. In his mouth was an unlighted Wheeling stogie.

"That's nice, ma'am. See you're goin' riding. Well, I'll go riding, too."

She thought, *Oh, Billy, hurry up and get here!* Outwardly she was cool, even scornful, as she said:

"Once I slapped your face, Mister Mack, for being insulting. How dare you inflict your company on me?"

Claude Mack laughed raspingly. "Now, ma'am. Not so highty-tighty. I guess you'll come ridin' with me all right."

"How dare—"

"We'll go ridin' out the Charles Town Pike, ma'am. I got something I want to show you."

The paddock whirled around Virginia Carter. How much did he know? She strove to keep her voice disdainful. "I can't imagine—"

"Now, ma'am, none of your airs. What if I was to tell you that Major Pettigrew Carter was one of the hottest rebels in Dixie? An' that the two Carter boys were fightin' with Johnston in the West? An' that his yaller-haired daughter—"

Virginia Carter felt all her defenses stripped away. She tried again to parry. "The name Carter is a common one in Virginia. What do you want, Mister Mack? Do you think I'm afraid of you?"

"Tha-at's better," said Claude Mack. "Now what do you say we take a little canter together out the Charles Town Pike? There's a couple of questions I'd like to have answered. I'll get one of the horses out of Miz Prentice's stable. *She* won't object, I'm certain sure." He gestured with his cigar to a little negro stable-boy. "Boy! Git out a saddle-horse for me."

Virginia Carter leaned against the paddock fence and closed her eyes. It was ended, all ended. They'd stand her up before a wall and blindfold her and someone would say, "Ready—aim—fire!" and the bullets—

She gasped. She could almost feel the bullets striking her poor, defenseless flesh.

Then she stiffened. No one could ever say that Major "Pet" Carter's daughter bowed down before a Yankee. Particularly a Yankee of the loathsome stamp of Claude Mack. She'd lead him away from the house before Billy came....

The colored swipe came leading two saddle-horses. Claude Mack climbed into the saddle. He still had his cigar. He was a ridiculous figure but a sinister one. The swipe put a stool down and Virginia Carter swung gracefully onto her horse.

They cantered along the Charles Town Pike.

"I reckon you don't know where this road leads, ma'am?" said Claude Mack.

"I don't know—anything," Virginia Carter told him. "Except that you are the most beastly man I have ever seen."

The Pinkerton agent chuckled. He seemed to take her words as a compliment.

"Now, ma'am, you want to act real nice to me. Abe Lincoln has done his share of pardonin', but he won't no more. I've got the goods on you, ma'am." He pulled his horse to a stop, and Virginia Carter's mount stopped companionably. Claude Mack looked for something. "H'yar we are!" he said suddenly. He reached over and took the reins from Virginia Carter's nerveless hands. "You won't need these, ma'am."

THEY rode through the underbrush of a little stand of woods, and, came upon a ridge overlooking the Potomac. Claude Mack removed the cigar from his mouth. "Now, ma'am, I don't want no nonsense from you. Who are the men you contact at Mary Prentice's? If you talk turkey with me, I'll try an' make it easy for you."

He rode closer to her and grasped her wrist with his powerful talon-like hand. His pale eyes bored into Virginia Carter's. She wanted to scream but no sound came from her throat.

"What were you to find out in Washington, ma'am?" he droned. His fingers ground relentlessly into her arm. She gasped with pain.

"I don't know," she whispered. "You're hurting—"

There was the sound of a running horse on the Charles Town Pike. She had no reason for screaming, but she did. She screamed at the top of her lungs, although no one could possibly hear her.

"Stop that!" said Claude Mack sharply. He slapped her across her mouth. Virginia Carter stared at him unbelievingly.

"You'll only make it harder for yourself, ma'am," Claude Mack said.

A horse came crashing through the underbrush and after a moment emerged upon the little plateau. Billy Taliaferro rode his blooded three-year-old up to them. The colt was whistling as though he had run nearly two miles at top speed. Billy Taliaferro drawled:

"I thought I heard a lady scream, but of co'se I couldn't have."

Virginia Carter said like a little girl: "He slapped me. He slapped me across the mouth."

Claude Mack said: "Now, Taliaferro. . . ." He whipped out a pistol with de-

ceptive speed and leveled it at Billy Taliaferro.

"I'd go easy, if I was you," he said. "We've had our eye . . ."

Billy Taliaferro's foot kicked out. The toe of his boot slashed at Mack's hand, and the pistol went sailing to the ground. It did not explode. Mack was off his horse in a second and diving for the gun. Taliaferro threw himself on the Pinkerton agent just as Mack was turning. They struggled on the ground.

Virginia Carter watched, enthralled. Billy Taliaferro's left hand was around the agent's gun-wrist. With short, driving blows he smashed his right hand to Mack's face again and again. The agent cursed raspingly as he sought to bring the gun to bear on Taliaferro.

There was a muffled *crack!* as the pistol exploded. To the horrified girl it seemed that Billy Taliaferro had been hit. The struggling bodies were suddenly motionless. Then Billy Taliaferro got slowly to his feet. Claude Mack lay with a trickle of blood running from his mouth.

"I thought he'd get his come-uppance one of these days," said Billy Taliaferro matter-of-factly.

Virginia Carter fought off hysteria. "Oh, Billy!" she said. "He knew all about us. He was—terrible! He—"

Billy Taliaferro said sharply: "Virginia Carter, get a-hold of yourself! Ride out to the pike and turn and ride slowly toward Georgetown. I'll catch up with you shortly."

She moaned: "Oh, Billy, I don't want to be alone. Why must you—" Her eyes fell inadvertently on Claude Mack. Then her gaze met Billy Taliaferro's. Suddenly she understood. Claude Mack could not be left where he might be found. The Potomac flowed below them. Billy wanted her to go ahead so that he could make it safe for them. She said obediently:

"All right, Billy. I'll ride ahead slowly."

She rode through the copse to the road, then turned the horse toward home and rode along at a walk. After a while Billy Taliaferro came out on the pike and cantered toward her. He had cleansed himself of the signs of his struggle with Claude Mack. He looked very young and charming and light-hearted. He began to talk about the ball to be held at Mary

Prentice's the following night. Virginia Carter understood that he wanted her to forget the limp figure of Claude Mack lying on the cold sod. They kept up a running fire of light conversation all the way in to the Prentice house.

Peter Jackson came running out to the stables. "Fo' the Lawd, Missie, I'se glad ter see you safe!" he said joyfully. "I tolle de Lieutenant whut'd happened an' he lit out lickety-split after you. Whut happened—"

Billy Taliaferro drawled easily: "Peter, you're getting old. You didn't see anything—except me and Miss Carter going for our afternoon canter. Get hold of that stable swipe and make sure that he didn't see anything either."

"I'll carve out dat boy's gizzard if'n he say a word," said Peter Jackson fervently.

THE next day it happened. Billy Taliaferro came up to the house in the early afternoon. Virginia Carter received him in the library.

Billy Taliaferro wore a look of elation. "Well, ma'am, your trip's a success."

"Grant's plan of campaign?" Virginia Carter asked. Her eyes grew bright. "Are you sure?"

"The disposition of the whole army," Billy Taliaferro affirmed. "One of the other agents is verifying it at this very moment. You'll know everything tonight. Lordy, girl, if you can get back to the Virginia side an' run to Marse Robert with this information, he can wrap old Grant around his little finger!"

His expression softened, became tender. "Virginia, do you remember when I was your beau? Why does it have to be different? Will you wait for me, Virginia?"

For no reason, a picture of the tall and handsome Captain Browning crossed her mind. But she cast the thought indignantly aside. What did a Yankee matter to her? She thought of Billy Taliaferro, how loyal he was to Dixie. He was in danger every minute of his life. He could be caught and shot as a spy. She smiled at him.

"Billy Taliaferro, you ol' goose! Haven't we always been beaux?"

The young Southerner bent forward to claim his rightful kiss. Outside, in the hallway, someone hummed "John Brown's Body." There was the sound of quick

steps across the floor. Virginia Carter looked up. Clay Browning stood in the open doorway. His expression was unreadable. In his hand, fallen at his side, was a bouquet of hot-house flowers. He said slowly, heavily:

"Beg your pardon, ma'am. I did not mean to intrude." He backed away from the door, and went away from there.

Billy Taliaferro smiled at her. "I must get back to headquarters. Until tonight, my dear."

He left, and Virginia Carter went up to her room to prepare for the grand ball. Her heart should have been light but somehow it was not. Was it because a Yankee captain had seen her kiss Billy Taliaferro? Ridiculous! She resolved to snub Captain Browning at every opportunity that night.

But her resolution faded when, that evening, the tall figure of the captain came across the ball-room floor, and he asked her to dance. Unaccountably her heart fluttered wildly. Before she knew it she was in his arms and whirling about the floor.

The dance ended and they went out on the veranda. It was a warm April night, the scent of lilac filled the air. They were silent. The musicians were playing "When This Cruel War Is Over." Virginia Carter murmured:

"When this cruel war is over . . . pray that we meet again!" Oh, Captain Browning, how true. . . .

"Beg pardon, Miz Carter. Note foh you fum one of the young officers."

Peter Jackson, old face discreetly blank, handed her a letter on a salver.

"Excuse me, Captain Browning." She tore open the note. The words smote her like a pronouncement of doom.

Virginia dear: Captain Browning has set a trap. I have been found out and Prentice mansion is under surveillance. Escape if you can and meet me at the relay station. Peter will go with you. God bless you! Billy.

"Another conquest, ma'am?" said Clay Browning imperturbably. She rippled her eyes shamelessly, deliberately flirting.

"Jealousy ill becomes you, Captain Browning. Just for that I shall answer

the young man in full. Please excuse me, sir."

She ran across the veranda into the house. Mary Prentice was chatting with a group of guests. Virginia Carter caught her eye as she sped up the winding staircase. She hurried to her room.

Mary Prentice knocked softly and entered. "What is it, dear?"

Virginia Carter showed her Billy Taliaferro's note. Mary Prentice took charge at once.

"I'll have Peter saddle one of the horses at the stables. He'll meet you on the Charles Town road. You can—"

She broke off sharply. Outside, there came the measured tramp of marching feet on the mansion driveway. They rushed to the window. A corporal's guard of Union soldiers was marching up to the door.

"They've found out!" cried Mary Prentice, white-lipped but firm. "My dear, get down to the stables as quickly as you can. Peter will have a horse ready."

"What about you?"

Mary Prentice said sharply: "As the wife of a British citizen I'm safe. It's you I'm worried for, child." She flew out of the room.

Virginia Carter trimmed the wick in the lamp low and hurried to the window. Her wing of the house was in darkness, thank Heaven! She pulled a cloak around her shoulders and thrust one patent-leather slipper across the window-sill.

A tomboy childhood helped her—and a lattice-support for some Virginia creeper which grew under her window. She reached the ground safely, and set off at a run for the darkened stables, holding her hoops high.

The old darkey had brought out her saddle-horse. He threw a side-saddle over the horse. "Dey's sojers, Miz Carter," he warned. "Dey's all aroun' de house! I'se gwine ahead an' meet you on de Charles Town road. I got me a horse spirited out beyon' de house!"

He helped Virginia Carter to the saddle, then slipped into the night. The girl spoke softly to the thoroughbred and rode toward the tradesman's entrance back of the stables. A dim shadow stepped suddenly forward from the gate.

"Halt!"

Virginia Carter reacted automatically. She put the gad to the thoroughbred and drove directly through the gate. The horse knocked aside two dim figures carrying carbines. They bawled into the night:

"Thar he goes! Halt er we'll shoot!"

Virginia Carter bent low over the horse's neck. Behind her she heard the crack of carbines. Several stray bullets spanked the air over her head. Then she was safe in the darkness and no more bullets came. She slowed the thoroughbred.

A low whistle came from the side of the pike. Then the voice of Peter: "Dat you, Miz Carter?"

A gasp of relief escaped her. "Yes, Peter. Take me to Mr. Taliaferro, quick now."

THE old negro rode a carriage-horse out of the woods and set off down the dark pike. After five minutes he turned off to the left, in the direction of the Potomac, and led the way along the faint trail. He seemed to see like a cat in the darkness. Virginia Carter threw the reins to him and ran to the house. At the rickety porch she halted.

"Billy!" she whispered.

There was an exclamation from inside. A light flared and Billy Taliaferro came to the door, holding a chimney-lamp in his left hand. He drew her inside.

"Thank God you got away safe!" he said fervently. "The Yankees are on to us. I've sent everybody away from this station. We must cross over the Potomac tonight. My work here is done."

"I'm so glad—" Virginia Carter said, and stopped. A warning whistle came from outside the house. Peter's whistle!

A voice said calmly beyond the darkness of the door: "Don't move, Lieutenant Taliaferro. I'm holding my gun on you."

Virginia Carter thrust her hand to her mouth. She knew that voice; so did Billy Taliaferro.

Clay Browning advanced across the door. He held a cocked pistol in his hand. "You are under arrest, Lieutenant. I hope you will see fit to come with me quietly."

Billy Taliaferro put the lamp on the table in the center of the shabby room. He said in a matter-of-fact voice: "You followed Miss Carter out from the Prentice house?"

Clay Browning nodded. "The house has been under surveillance for several weeks. What has happened to Claude Mack?"

Billy Taliaferro's eyes gleamed. "I came on him badgering Miss Carter in a lonely spot, sir. I had to take measures."

Clay Browning said quietly: "You have done the Union a service, sir. Now, Lieutenant, I'll have to ask you to go with me."

"Captain," said Billy Taliaferro. "You may do with me as you like, but Miss Carter goes."

Clay Browning seemed to see Virginia Carter for the first time, standing in the shadows at one side. "I have my duty, sir. Every person at the Prentice mansion falls under suspicion."

"Then—*look out!*" yelled Billy Taliaferro. He threw himself to one side and his hand stabbed for the cavalryman's pistol in his holster. The thunder of gunfire filled the room, and white smoke billowed upward. Virginia Carter looked on, dazed, horrified.

For a long moment time hung suspended. Clay Browning stood with smoking pistol by the door. Billy Taliaferro held a gun in his right hand. He stared at the Yankee officer with an awful intensity. Then, as Virginia Carter screamed, Taliaferro seemed to stumble. He sprawled at full length on the rough pine planks of the floor. A little pool of blood seeped beneath his shirt.

Virginia Carter threw herself on her knees beside him with a cry. One glance was enough. She had seen enough of death in the Richmond hospitals not to recognize it here.

A tall figure stood over her. "Is he badly wounded, ma'am?"

She turned on him like a fury. "He's dying—you murdered him. I hate you, I hate you!"

She burst into a wild fury of weeping. Billy Taliaferro opened tired eyes. They rested on Clay Browning. "No." His voice was very faint. "He only did his duty. I would have done the same in his place."

His breath came haltingly. "Captain Browning . . . my fiancée . . . I'd like to say good-bye . . ."

Clay Browning bowed his head. He walked with military tread to the door, and went outside.

"Bend closer . . ." whispered Billy Taliaferro. "Closer yet. . . . Grant's strategy—moves by left flank toward Richmond . . . Sigel to cut off Shenandoah Valley . . . Butler to march up south bank of the James . . . Marse Robert will know what to do. . . ."

A smile flickered across his face. "Am I still your beau, Virginia Carter?"

He slumped in her arms.

THE girl sobbed quietly. After a little while Clay Browning came back into the room. He said gently: "Ma'am, we must go back to town."

She looked up blindly. "Why did you have to kill him? Is there nothing in your heart but hate?"

Clay Browning said simply: "Don't make my duty harder for me, ma'am."

She said in a dreary voice: "You danced with me. You flirted with me and pretended you'd lost your heart. And all the time you were trying to trap me, Captain Browning. But I knew, Captain Browning. I knew all the time!"

Clay Browning said wretchedly: "Ma'am . . ."

Virginia Carter cried hysterically: "Do you think I'll let Billy Taliaferro die in vain?" She pulled Billy Taliaferro's pistol from where she had concealed it beneath her skirt. "Stand back, sir!"

There was a faint smile on his face. "I command you to put down that gun, ma'am." He began walking toward her.

"I pray you won't make me a murderer, Captain Browning," Virginia Carter gasped. "I will fire, sir!"

She pulled the trigger. The heavy pistol bucked in her hand. Clay Browning whirled around with the force of an invisible blow, and sagged to the floor. He lay motionless.

She got up and walked to him like a woman in a dream. He was shot through the chest, high on the right side. The clavicle seemed smashed. He was bleeding.

She cried out: "Peter! Peter Jackson. Come here and help me!"

The moments ticked off. She wondered if Peter had deserted her. Then his frightened face peered in the doorway.

"Lawd, Lawd!" he moaned. "Dey's death here."

"Help me move Captain Browning to that couch."

There were no bandages. One of her petticoats would have to do. She made a rough compress and bandaged the wound tightly.

"Thank you, ma'am."

She saw that his eyes were open.

"I'd do the same for any enemy," she told him frigidly.

"It isn't true, ma'am. I wasn't pretending." His voice came drowsily. "I love you, ma'am . . . when this cruel war is over . . . Grant will take Richmond, ma'am . . ."

He was wandering already. On impulse she unfastened her kerchief and placed it near the couch.

"Come, Peter."

The horses neighed in the darkness. The old negro lifted Virginia Carter to the saddle, then climbed on his horse and led the way through the pitch-black woods.

They rode for half an hour. Then they came out on the river bank.

Peter whistled. A low, answering whistle came, and a man advanced warily from a patch of woods.

"I want to cross to the Virginia side," the girl said.

"Yes, ma'am. We been expectin' yo'. There's a hawse ready for yo' across the river."

Virginia Carter turned and held out her hand. "Peter, you've been a good and loyal friend. I'm grateful, Peter. See that word is gotten to Captain Browning's friends. He mustn't bleed to death. Good-bye, Peter."

"Good-bye, Miz Carter."

She stepped into the boat and the man shoved off. He began rowing confidently into the mists that hung over the river.

HURRAH! HURRAH! For the Southern Rights, hurrah! Turn back the Yankees at the Wilderness, boys. Check Sigel in the Valley, bottle up Butler in Bermuda Hundred! Throw them back at Cold Harbor . . . and hold Richmond another desperate year.

But Dixie is finished. Not by force of arms—no soldiers could ever lick Johnny Reb. Four years of blockade and hunger have done their work. Sherman has burned a hundred-mile path to the sea, and the Valley of Virginia will grow no crops for many years. Old Grant slogs on, unin-

spired and irresistible. Richmond is defended, and falls. Robert E. Lee reviews his hungry soldiers. Then—Appomattox. . . .

Virginia Carter sat on the veranda of the ruined house in Richmond. News of Appomattox had come to the city, and they had the dreary knowledge of defeat. Union troops occupied the city, and Richmond citizens saw blue uniforms where they had sworn would never enter.

A tall Yankee officer picked his way down the street, saber clanking at his side. When he came before the house he looked up at the veranda and the golden-haired girl. Then he deliberately unfastened the gate-latch and let himself in. He walked up the path with a military tread.

Then Virginia Carter was off the veranda and running to meet him. For the Yankee officer held a bit of georgette kerchief in his hand. And on his lips was a smile.

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Admiral Ironsides

By TED FOX

Federal cannonballs couldn't sink the Merrimac. But destruction lurked within her iron-sheathed hull—and only one man stood between the safety of her sweat-streaked, powder-blackened crew and the diabolical death-plot of a turn-coat spy!

SLOWLY and with hardly a sound other than the low coughing of its exhaust, the little shallow-draught launch glided past the point of Ragged

Island. Standing in the doorway of the darkened pilot-house, Lieutenant Tom Burgess cursed the full moon that had come out from behind a bank of clouds

overhead. He felt suddenly nervous and on edge. The trip down the James River from Richmond had been a peaceful one, but now, until they reached the safety of the Confederate batteries stationed at Pig Point, they were open to attack from Union boats that might be prowling these waters. Not that Tom was expecting trouble. The whole thing had been planned with the utmost secrecy.

Glancing back he watched the two barges in tow emerging from the shadows along the island. He could make out the dozen or so soldiers crouching on their bow and stern decks. Moonlight glinted on rifle-barrels and on the white tarpaulins covering the cargoes.

Under those tarpaulins were the hopes of a desperate, hard-pressed Confederacy, Lieutenant Thomas Burgess thought grimly. It was a grave responsibility that had been plunged onto his shoulders. The whole success of McClellan's campaign, the very fate of Richmond perhaps, lay in his hands. His eyes roamed the surface of the water on every side, ready and alert for the first sign of danger.

Instinctively he turned and peered across the James River at the lights of the Union fleet anchored off Newport News four miles away. Beyond them, all the way to Fortress Monroe, were more ships, he knew, blockading Hampton Roads and stifling Confederate trade with England and France and other foreign nations.

A BRUPTLY, with the suddenness of an explosion, a wild cry rose from one of the barges astern. And all in the same split second a fusillade of shots rang out. Orange flaine slashed the night. A hail of bullets thudded into the wooden sides of the pilot-house, crashed through a glass window inches from Tom's head.

With a shout at the pilot, the lieutenant sprang to the launch's deck. For a split second he stood there, staring in dismay at a flotilla of small boats racing out of the mouth of Ragged Creek and bearing down on them with a roar of shots. In the brilliant moonlight he could make out the blue uniforms of Union soldiers. There were a dozen or more boats, loaded to the gunwales.

A bell clanged furiously in the launch's engine-room and water thrashed at her

stern as the coughing of her exhaust quickened and a shower of sparks vomited from her stack. She surged forward sluggishly. But the Union boats were less than a hundred yards off now.

Tom looked back at the barges. His gray-clad soldiers were crouched down behind the canvas-covered cargoes, returning the Union fire. They were hopelessly outnumbered, though. Once the Yankees boarded them it would be all over in a second.

With a low curse he ran forward to the pivot gun mounted in the bow of the launch. Two soldiers crouched beside it. Swinging the muzzle around, Tom sighted at the nearest boat, sprang back as fire touched powder.

With a thunderous roar the cannon exploded. The launch trembled under the recoil. A cloud of black powder-smoke swirled up into Tom's face. He heard the impact of the ball hitting the water, knew he'd missed.

"Load with grape," he snapped at the soldiers.

They were springing forward instantly, ramming a fresh charge down the muzzle, loading it and springing back as he sighted at the Union boat.

"Fire."

Again that thunderous roar and the shuddering of the launch's timbers. But this time a wild, agonized cry told Tom he'd made a hit. And as the powder-smoke lifted, he saw the lead boat was in a shambles. Half its load of soldiers had been killed or wounded by that blast of small-shot. The boat itself was sinking. Screams of agony filled the night air. The other boats had stopped.

But now they were coming on again, spreading out under the shouted commands of their officers. A dull rage burned inside of Tom. They must have known that he would pass by this point and had lain in wait for him, he thought furiously. It had all the signs of a premeditated attack. And that could mean only one thing. Someone had played the part of a traitor.

Twice more the cannon poured out its deadly fire and two more boats sank beneath the waves. But a third was swinging alongside the second barge. Blue-clad soldiers were swarming over its after-deck suddenly and Tom's hopes slowly sank.

There were too many of them, he thought fiercely. His soldiers were giving ground grudgingly. As long as there was life and gunpowder they'd keep on fighting. They were a hand-picked lot. But the Union men outnumbered them five to one.

Suddenly Tom stiffened and stared ahead over the prow of the launch. At first he thought it was some sort of freak lightning. Then the heavy boom of cannon-fire reached his ears and he knew it was from the batteries on Pig Point. A signal! And at the same instant he saw a fast launch with several skiffs in tow streaking toward them over the moon-drenched surface of the river. Help was coming.

WITH a shout Tom swung the muzzle of his cannon onto a Union boat, swerving in to grapple the first barge. It was point-blank range and he couldn't miss. Boat and men were lifted bodily from the water. Tom gritted his teeth at the sight. For a second a score of heads appeared on the surface of the river. Some sank. Others made for the shore.

Over his shoulder, Tom saw the rescue boats bearing down on them at full speed. If they could hold out for another few minutes, he thought, they might get through. But two of the Union boats were coming up alongside of the launch. Bullets swept across the deck.

Then it hit him. High up in the left shoulder. It whirled Tom about and slammed him up against the pivot gun. It brought a galaxy of stars pin-wheeling before his eyes. Nausea gagged in his throat.

He shook his head savagely. One of his gunners was down. The other was straining frantically to reload the cannon. Out of the corners of his eyes Tom saw a swarm of Union soldiers scrambling onto the decks of the launch. The first wave of them made for the pilot-house and engine-room and almost immediately the launch's engine stopped. The second wave started up the deck toward Tom and the one remaining soldier. Tom drew his pistol. The soldier had a knife. It was two against twenty heavily armed men.

But all at once a shape glided into the range of Tom's vision and before he was fully aware of what was happening, an avalanche of soldiers dressed in Confederate gray spilled onto the decks of the

launch. With savage yells they fell on the Union men. It was a hand-to-hand fight. Tom sprang forward to join it.

But the Yankees abruptly turned and retreated along the deck to their boats. The tide had turned suddenly. Leaping into their boats, they pulled away across the river toward Newport News. The Confederate troops were swarming over the barges now. Their rebel war-cry rang out fiercely over the rattle of gun-fire.

Then gradually the firing slackened and died. Tom leaned against his pivot gun, gasping in great burning lungfuls of fresh air.

"Tom Burgess," a voice suddenly growled at his elbow. "What in the hell are you doing here?"

Tom looked up and found himself staring at a runty little man with a freckled, grinning face and a set of sergeant's stripes on the sleeve of his gray coat.

"Jeb McGee," he gasped, partly in surprise, partly from a twinge of pain in his shoulder. "I thought the Yanks had gotten you at Bull Run. I saw your name in the missing bulletin."

They shook hands warmly.

"Not me," the little sergeant growled. "It takes more than thirty thousand Yanks to kill a McGee. You ought to know that."

Tom grinned. But he sobered instantly. "You got here just in time," he said. "Take over, Jeb, while I see what's happened to my engineer and pilot."

A quick inspection showed Tom that both engineer and pilot had been shot down by the Union soldiers. When he stepped out on deck again Jeb was shouting orders in a deep-throated voice.

"Three of your men killed, twelve wounded," he reported. "I don't know how many the enemy lost. Nearer twenty, I should say, from the bodies floating around. That pivot gun sure raised holy hell."

Tom leaned against the pilot-house weakly. His shoulder was throbbing with each movement of his body. Jeb's launch and string of boats had tied up alongside the barges. His soldiers were dragging a number of Union wounded from the river. Tom shivered slightly. A cold breeze had sprung up and was sweeping across the open water.

“WE thought we saw some Yankee boats over here just after sundown,” Jeb explained, “and were starting out to investigate when we heard your firing and knew there was something up.”

“I’ve got to get those barges to Norfolk by midnight,” Tom answered. “If you’ll loan me some of your men to run the launch, I think I can make it in time.”

Jeb nodded. “I’ll pilot you in myself. I know every inch of these waters.”

Tom Burgess watched as the wounded and prisoners were quickly transferred to the rescue boats. Then the launch’s motor coughed to life and water thrashed at her stern as she pulled against the tow-ropes and straightened out the drifting barges. Tom stood in the pilot-house beside McGee. The little sergeant was still for a moment. Then he asked abruptly:

“What’s it all about, Tom? What’s in those barges so important it brought the Yankees all the way over here after it?”

“It started out to be a military secret,” Tom answered grimly, “but since the whole Union army seems to know about it, I guess there’s no harm in telling you. Armored plating for the Merrimac, Jeb. That’s what’s under those tarps. One of the most valuable cargoes a ship ever carried.”

“Merrimac,” Jeb snorted disappointedly. “I heard they were converting some old scow into an iron-clad over at the Navy Yard. Damn foolishness if you ask me; a waste of time and money.”

“You’re like everybody else,” Tom said earnestly, “but it’s not foolishness, Jeb. What chance has our navy, a handful of leaky gun-boats, got against the Yankee fleet, one of the best in the world? Yet we’ve got to break the blockade in Hampton Roads. We’ve got to keep McClellan from using the troops at Old Point Comfort in a march on Richmond. And the Merrimac’s going to do just that. Iron-clads are something new and new things are always ridiculed at first. But wooden ships are a thing of the past. You wait and see. The Yankees think the same thing. They’re building an iron-clad of their own up in New York. It’s called the Monitor. We’re racing to get our ship into service ahead of them or it won’t do us much good.”

“I’m only a soldier and don’t know much about ships,” Jeb said with a chuckle,

“but I still think it’s damn foolishness. Iron boats just aren’t practical.”

Tom Burgess smiled to himself in the darkness. A lot of people scoffed at the idea, just like Jeb McGee, but his faith in the Merrimac wasn’t dampened. The iron-clad was nearly completed now. In a short while its worth would be proved—or disproved—once and for all.

Half an hour later the launch and its string of barges slipped under the nose of the batteries on Pig Point and continued on its way toward Craney’s Island, a few miles beyond. Then, shortly after midnight, they reached the Gosport Navy Yard beyond Portsmouth and tied up at a wharf near the drydock where the Merrimac was being outfitted.

“You can take the launch back with you to Pig Point,” Tom told McGee, “but first you’d better come along with me while I report to Colonel Wyman. He’s one of the officers in charge of plating the Merrimac. I’ve been acting under him now for several months.”

“Sure,” Jeb grinned. “I’m in no hurry to get back to that dump. Polish guns ten hours a day and pray for some Union boat to come within range. That’s all the excitement we ever get.”

IT was a twenty-minute walk to Colonel Wyman’s red brick house on a back street in Portsmouth. Lights glowed in the downstairs windows. A colored servant opened the door and led them into the drawing-room to the right of the big entrance hall.

As he stepped into the brilliantly lighted room, Tom Burgess tensed suddenly. Colonel Wyman was just rising from a chair beside the cheery fire burning in the open hearth, a questioning look on his finely chiseled face. He was a soldier of the old school, nearing sixty with iron-gray hair and a square, determined jaw.

But it was the other two occupants of the room that Tom was staring at intently—Ann Wyman and Carl Tennent. As usual when he saw Ann, Tom’s pulse-beat quickened. She was a lovely, brown-haired, brown-eyed girl of eighteen. He’d seen a lot of her in the last few months since he’d been detailed to special duty with her father. He’d grown to like her—almost too much.

At sight of Carl Tennent a dull rage gripped Tom. He didn't like the other man, never had, though there wasn't any particular reason for his feeling the way he did. It wasn't jealousy, though Tennent spent all his free time in Ann's company. It was more a feeling of distrust—nothing definite—nothing he could put his finger on.

"Well?" Wyman asked, as Tom hesitated in the doorway. "Did you get through without any trouble? Are the plates safe?"

"They're safe," Tom answered, walking slowly into the room, "but the Yanks jumped us at Ragged Island. We had something of a skirmish."

Tom turned and introduced Jeb McGee, who had followed him into the room. The little sergeant saluted stiffly, stood at one side, his eyes roaming about the interior of the room, although his head never moved.

"What happened?" Wyman began.

But he was interrupted by Ann, who sprang to her feet and ran toward Tom, a frightened cry on her lips.

"You're wounded. Let me look, let me—"

"It's nothing," Tom Burgess said.

"Sit down," she ordered him firmly, "and take off that coat."

Tom obeyed sheepishly. In a minute she'd ripped open his blood-soaked shirt and laid his shoulder bare. There was a red round hole just below his collar-bone, another in his back, oozing blood, where the bullet had come out. With water brought from the kitchen, Ann bathed his shoulder tenderly, bound it tightly with bandages. As she worked, Tom recounted briefly what had happened.

"It was a trap," he finished grimly. "Someone tipped them off that I was coming down the river. How many people knew I'd gone to Richmond to bring that shipment down by boat?"

Colonel Wyman was frowning. "No one but myself, you and Lieutenant Tennent here," he growled. "The matter was put into my hands and I told no one of our plans. How about you, Carl?"

Tennent shook his head. "I kept my mouth shut," he answered shortly.

Tom was regarding him tensely. Maybe that feeling of distrust wasn't so foolish after all, he thought. Maybe—

"Under the circumstances I don't see how it could have been a premeditated attack," Wyman said.

"It was, though," Tom answered slowly. "That's why I brought McGee here with me, to back up my words."

Jeb nodded his head emphatically. "It must have been all planned, sir. There's nothing at Ragged Island that would interest the Federals."

"Which means," Tom said, tight-lipped, "that someone told them I would pass by there just after dark."

FOR a moment the implication of those words didn't dawn on Wyman. Then abruptly his face turned a fiery red.

"I reckon you don't understand what you're saying, Lieutenant Burgess," he began angrily, then suddenly laughed. "I suppose you think I tipped the Federals off. Is that it?"

"No, sir," Tom answered quietly. "I know you didn't. And I know I didn't."

Carl Tennent flushed. "But you think I did?"

Tom stared squarely at him. "Did you?"

Tennent clenched his fists and took a step forward. His face was white with rage all of a sudden.

"Hold on there, Tom," Wyman interrupted sharply. "You're forgetting yourself, aren't you?"

Ann finished with his bandage and stepped back. There was a glint of anger in her eyes suddenly.

"Tom must be joking," she cried.

Tom rose to his feet and slipped on his coat. "I was never more serious in my life," he said quietly. "Someone betrayed us and I mean to find out who it was. It happened once. It's liable to happen again."

He didn't give them a chance to say anything. With a curt salute and a muttered thanks to Ann he turned on his heel and strode from the room. In the hall he paused for Jeb to catch up with him. Then he let himself out and strode down the steps to the street.

"You sure put your foot in it that time," the little sergeant growled. "Didn't you?"

Tom nodded. He'd blown off his face when he shoudn't have, he knew. He'd seen Ann's anger and resentment flare up at his last words, seen her father's mouth

open to reprimand him. He didn't blame either of them much. He'd been a little too outspoken maybe. But he couldn't help it. Carl Tennent to him was approximately the same as waving a red flag in front of a bull.

"Think he's the gent who tipped the Yankees off?" McGee asked as they strode through the night in the direction of the Navy Yard.

Tom shrugged. "If only the three of us knew, he must have been the one."

"Better go slow about accusing him without proof," Jeb advised. "That's a serious charge."

Tom Burgess nodded. "If he's a spy, he'll give himself away sooner or later. About all I can do is keep my eyes open and wait."

Jeb grunted. "Looks to me like you'll have a long wait. He's a clever devil. D'you notice his eyes? They're like a gambler's I used to know."

At the wharf they parted.

"I'll send your launch back in the morning," Jeb called from the pilot-house. "Good luck to you and your iron-clad. You'll both be needing plenty of it I'm thinking."

Tom watched as the launch turned and coughed away into the darkness. Seeing Jeb again was mighty good. He'd thought him killed at Bull Run. He and Jeb had lived for fifteen years on adjoining farms over in the Shenandoah Valley below Lexington. They'd gone to school together, joined the army together at the first call to arms. He doubted that their paths would cross again before the war was ended.

But it was only the next morning as he was standing in the drydock, looking up at the great bulk of the Merrimac towering above him, that Tom felt a hand clamp down on his shoulder and, turning, found McGee standing beside him, a broad grin on his freckled face.

"I got myself transferred," he said. "Too many cannons to polish over at the Point. Decided I'd rather be with you and your iron-clad nonsense."

Tom chuckled. "You'll change your opinion one of these days. Glad you came. We'll be needing good gunners when we get finished here and go out to meet the Union fleet."

TAKING Jeb by the arm, Tom led him around the drydock. The sides and deck of the Merrimac were swarming with workmen and he had to shout to make himself heard above the steady pound and scrape of hammers and saws.

"When the Yankees pulled out of Norfolk last year they destroyed nearly everything they left behind," he explained, "including several perfectly good ships. The Merrimac was one of them that burnt and sank. She was a frigate of thirty-five hundred tons and forty guns. We raised her and cut her down to the berth-deck, covered over both ends. Over the midship section, for a hundred and seventy feet as you can see, we've built a roof of pitch-pine and oak twenty-four inches thick and set at an angle of forty-five degrees to deflect cannon balls. The wood backing is being covered now with the iron plates I brought down from Richmond. On the prow there'll be a ram just below the water-line. Some of the officers set a lot of store by that."

Jeb squinted up the side of the ship skeptically. "Guns're all I know about boats. What's her armament going to be?"

"Two 7-inch rifles for bow and stern pivots, two 6-inch rifles and six 9-inch smooth-bore broadside—ten in all," Tom answered. "It's her engines that are weak, though. Not her guns. Those engines were condemned over a year ago when she belonged to the Federals. They've been at the bottom of the river since then. Nobody knows whether they'll run or not."

Jeb chuckled. "Sounds promising. I'll bet she doesn't even float when you launch her. I still claim iron-clads—"

He broke off sharply and with a shrill yell sprang on Tom and flung him roughly to the ground. Tom landed on his back with Jeb sprawled halfway across his prostrate body. A deafening crash sounded almost in his ears. For a moment Tom lay perfectly still.

Then raising himself onto his elbows, he stared in horror at a pile of iron plates scattered along the ground where he'd been standing a moment before. Without the slightest warning they'd come crashing down from above. Any one of them would have crushed in his skull like a negg-shell.

With a low curse Tom rolled to his feet

and, springing to the nearest ladder, started up the side of the ship. Three-quarters of a minute after the plates had hit the ground he was climbing onto the top deck of the Merrimac. A white-faced workman was staring at him in fear and dismay.

"Where did those plates come from?" Tom snapped. "What happened? Speak up, man."

The workman shook his head dazedly. "I had them stacked on that sling there, ready for lowering over the side," he gasped. "I went for some more. I wasn't gone but a minute. When I came back—"

"Cold the sling have upset itself?"

"I don't see how, sir."

"Who's in charge of this work here?"

"Lieutenant Carl Tennent, sir."

Tom stiffened and his gaze flashed around the circle of workmen and soldiers that had quickly gathered.

"Easy now," Jeb said at Tom's elbow. "It was an accident until you have proof the other way."

Tom gritted his teeth fiercely.

"As far as I'm concerned, Tennent's a Union spy," he said, low-voiced. "I knew too much, so he decided to get rid of me."

"Maybe. But you still haven't any proof."

"To hell with proof. If he's a spy, I can't let him run around loose this way. I'm going to the proper authorities and—"

"I wouldn't, Tom. He'll only make a monkey out of you. I'd wait and catch him at it and then have a showdown. It's bound to come sooner or later."

Tom relaxed slowly. "Maybe you're right," he agreed. "That's twice you've saved my life, Jeb. I won't forget it."

"You better," the little sergeant grinned, "or next time I'll let them get yuh."

In the weeks that followed, Tom watched Tennent like a hawk. But there was no repetition of the "accident" that had almost cost him his life. They worked together without speaking, met at Ann's house the few times Tom went there. Ann had changed in her attitude toward him since that night he'd practically accused Tennent of being a spy. Ann had grown cool and so had her father. Tom's visits grew fewer and fewer.

"Tennent's clever," Jeb kept repeating. "He'll wait and then strike just once more."

"At me, or the Merrimac?" Tom asked. Jeb merely shrugged.

THEN, that first week in March, 1862, the Merrimac was launched.

"She floats," was Jeb's only comment. "Now will she run?"

Work was pushed rapidly to completion and on the following Saturday, March 8th, orders were suddenly given out for a trial run. Tom stood on the top deck watching the clouds of black smoke that were pouring from the ship's stack amidships. He and Jeb had been assigned to duty at one of the 9-inch guns on the starboard broadside. All around him confusion reigned. Workmen were striving desperately to finish up their jobs before sailing time. Officers were drilling their hastily assembled crew. Commander Buchanan stood by the pilot-house, surveying the scene calmly.

"Why don't they wait a few days instead of rushing things?" Jeb growled. "Three hundred and fifty men on board and two-thirds of them soldiers who've never been anywhere near salt water before."

Tom frowned. "There's a rumor going around that the Monitor's left New York," he said. "Nobody seems to know much about it except it's an iron-clad and the Federals suddenly decided to bring it down here. That may have something to do with this trial run we're going to make."

Jeb whistled softly. "At least Lieutenant Tennent isn't going with us," he grunted. "That's something to be thankful for."

The ship's whistle screeched abruptly and instantly the workmen swarming over the decks and sides, dropped their tools and made a mad scramble for the dock. A tug puffed at the Merrimac's bow, another at her stern, and slowly, as the last line was dropped over the side, the bulky vessel swung away from her berth and nosed out into the stream. Two short blasts from her whistle and the tugs backed away. A bell clanged loudly.

Then a sudden clanking noise and the hiss of escaping steam sounded from the engine-room. The ship trembled slightly. Water thrashed at her stern. Slowly, sluggishly then, the Merrimac began her maiden voyage. To Tom she seemed to be hardly moving.

"About four miles an hour," he growled. "Those engines are worse than I thought they were."

Pouring out great clouds of smoke from her single stack, the Merrimac steamed down the Elizabeth River. The shore on either side and the batteries on Craney Island were lined with troops who cheered as she passed. Tom felt a savage thrill run through him. This was the moment he'd been waiting six long months for. This was the test run that would prove the Merrimac's worth and the faith of its builders.

Off Sewell's point an hour later they swung in a wide arc and took the south channel, headed for Newport News. Across Hampton Roads Tom could see three full-rigged ships and several gun-boats anchored off Old Point Comfort. He knew they were Union men-of-war. Two more were stationed off Newport News, the frigate Congress, fifty guns, and the sloop Cumberland, thirty. They were swinging lazily at their anchors.

A slow frown gathered on Tom's brow as they steamed slowly toward the Union boats. It was two o'clock in the afternoon and he was waiting expectantly for the Merrimac to turn and head back for the Navy Yard. She drew twenty-two feet and though it was high tide, he knew there wouldn't be room to turn if they once entered the James River channel.

Then abruptly a shrill cry rang through the Merrimac:

"Clear decks for action! Take your battle stations, you men! Strip for action!"

Tom looked at Jeb in astonishment. The little sergeant swore softly.

"I had a hunch this wasn't just a trial run," he growled. "We're gonna attack the whole cockeyed Union fleet."

Tom tensed slowly. He hadn't suspected it. Jeb's eyes were suddenly ablaze with excitement.

"It's crazier than hell," he half shouted. "This tub's only half-completed. Her guns have never been fired. Her engines—hell, listen to 'em wheezing. And the crew doesn't know one end of the boat from another. What chance have we got? Buchanan must be—"

"He's got guts," Tom answered fiercely. "He's going to try and break the Union

blockade before the Monitor gets here. They aren't expecting us. We'll—"

"Gunner to their stations! All hands clear for action!"

TOM sprang for the nearest ladder, Jeb at his heels. Below decks gun-crews were taking their places beside their guns. Powder-monkeys were bringing up ammunition from the magazine in the hold. The noise of the engines was louder here. Tom could smell the steam and hot grease. But there was no panic, no scene of confusion. Men spoke to each other in low tones, looked questioningly at their officers. Their faces were tense and expectant. They were soldiers, most of them, hand-picked men from the batteries around Norfolk and the garrisons at Yorktown and Petersburg. Soldiers manning a ship of war! The incongruity of it hit Tom with full force at that moment and he felt a sudden apprehension. Not for himself or for Jeb or the men. But for the success of their venture.

Tom's crew were at their stations when he and Jeb strode up. Through the gun-port he could see the frigate Congress less than half a mile away now and drawing steadily nearer. Men were racing over her decks, springing into the rigging to loosen her topsails.

With a thunderous roar the Cumberland opened fire, followed by the Congress, and then the gun-boats and the shore batteries at Newport News. The Merrimac shuddered as a hail of cannon balls thudded against her sides. Tom Burgess clenched his teeth, looked at Jeb . . . then grinned suddenly. Any ordinary ship would have been blown out of the water by that first furious blast, he thought tensely. But the Merrimac's iron plates had held.

Then the order came.

"Open fire!"

And instantly the Merrimac's starboard broadside raked the Congress from bow to stern. Black powder-smoke swirled in the gun-port, stung Tom's eyes. Leaping forward, he directed the reloading of the gun. Jeb was ramming home the charge. Again came the order to fire and again the Merrimac poured her starboard broadside into the Congress.

Then the frigate passed out of range. But the Merrimac steamed on, heading

straight for the Cumberland. They were going to ram the sloop, Tom realized, and braced himself for the shock. A second later it came. From stem to stern the Merrimac shivered and slowed to a halt. Bells clanged and the engines stopped. More bells and the Merrimac began to back slowly, her engines throbbing and pounding under the strain. Tom peered down the gun-deck, saw their forward pivot firing as fast as her crew could load and reload.

Backing clear, the Merrimac forged ahead again, helm hard over, heading up the river to turn. As she did the Cumberland came slowly into view through the port. For a moment Tom could hardly believe his eyes as they fell on the gaping hole in her side where the ram had struck. Already the ill-fated sloop was beginning to fill and list to port. Her decks were in a shambles, strewn with dead and wounded as her scuppers ran red with blood.

Thirty minutes it took the Merrimac to swing about and head back for the Congress which, with the Cumberland and the shore batteries, had kept up an incessant fire. Inside the iron-clad the thud and pound of shot striking her plates was deafening. The Congress had slipped her anchor and loosed her topsails in an effort to escape, but had promptly grounded. Steaming within two hundred yards of her, the Merrimac stopped. She poured shot after shot into the grounded vessel. Her forward pivot raked the Cumberland.

As fast as fresh charges could be rammed down her smoking throat, Tom's gun was fired. Two men lay dead on the deck, hit by rifle bullets that had come flying through the open port. Tom wiped the sweat from his brow. The stench of powder-smoke, hot and acrid, burned his nostrils. He glanced over his shoulder. The next gun forward had been silenced, its muzzle shot clean away. The others were pouring out their deadly fire with clock-like precision.

"What do you think of iron-clads now?" he shouted at Jeb. "Listen to those shells glancing off the plates!"

McGee didn't answer, but from the expression on his tense, powder-streaked face Tom saw he was greatly impressed. They were under fire from a hundred or more

heavy guns. And they were still afloat, still fighting against overwhelming odds.

Then the Cumberland went down with a roar, sinking until only her masts showed above the surface of the river. It was a sight Tom would never forget. All the way to shore the water was strewn with wreckage and the heads of a score or more of her sailors who had stayed with her to the very end.

THEN word that the rest of the Federal fleet was coming ran like lightning through the Merrimac and the men looked at each other uneasily. But the attack never materialized. Half an hour passed, then an hour and still no fleet, and finally a rumor spread through the gun-room that it had run aground between Old Point Comfort and Newport News. Only the Minnesota had come within range. Then she, too, had grounded.

"Cease firing!"

The order rang out shrilly and instantly the Merrimac's guns fell silent. Tom sprang to the port and peered out, turned with a shout:

"The Congress has run up her white flag! She's surrendered!"

Minutes passed. Then came the order: "Load with hot shot!"

Tom looked at Jeb. That could mean only one thing, he thought. To set fire to the Congress. A handful of Confederate small boats that had joined the fray had tried in vain to capture her. But the fire from the shore batteries had driven them back. Now the mighty frigate was to be destroyed.

Red hot cannon balls were brought up from below, loaded and fired. Three rounds the starboard broadside hurled into the Congress. Then she burst into flames. Tom could see her crew leaping over the sides and swimming toward shore.

Slowly, her engines wheezing painfully, the Merrimac backed away. Her guns were silent now. Tom waited tensely for the next move, wondering if they'd attack the Minnesota and the other ships grounded off Old Point Comfort.

But the Merrimac turned sluggishly and headed away, steaming back up the south channel in the direction of Norfolk. Lieutenant Jones, second in command, suddenly appeared in the gun-deck. The crews

snapped to attention as he walked slowly by, turned and addressed them quietly:

"Commodore Buchanan has been wounded and I am now in command," he said, a grim smile on his bearded lips. "Because of tides and darkness we are withdrawing. But the battle is not over. In the morning we shall attack the Minnesota and the remainder of the Union fleet in Hampton Roads. Until then get as much rest as you can. Tomorrow will be another hard day."

When he was gone the grim task of gathering up the wounded and dead was begun. Tom helped, counted twenty-one killed and hurt.

"Could have been worse," Jeb grunted when they were finished. "Could have been three hundred and fifty if it wasn't for those iron plates."

"Changed your opinion of iron-clads?" Tom asked.

McGee nodded soberly. "You were right," he said, "though I sure thought you were crazy."

Climbing out onto the top deck a short while later Tom Burgess stared about him in astonishment. The smoke-stack, stanchions, railings, everything was gone, swept clean by the Union gun-fire. The Confederate flag fluttered from a boarding-pike stuck in the deck, its regular staff having disappeared with the rest. Peering over the side, Tom counted the dents in the armor. There were fewer than he'd expected. Here and there a plate had cracked.

Standing with his back to the setting sun, Tom stared across Hampton Roads at the Congress which was enveloped now in thick clouds of smoke. Tongues of flame licked up her masts, spread out along the spars and rigging. A cluster of small boats encircled her, taking off the remainder of her crew.

Darkness was falling when the Merrimac dropped anchor for the night off Sewall's Point. Several barges put out from shore and by the light of torches Commander Buchanan and the dead and wounded were lowered over the side and taken away. Supper followed, then repairs were made in preparation for the fight with the Union fleet in the morning.

It was ten o'clock by the time Tom finished his work. With Jeb he went on deck

to watch the Congress which was still blazing on the opposite shore. It was an awesome spectacle. Though four miles away, the glare from her flames shone in the water alongside the Merrimac, every spar and rope traced in glittering red, flames streaking skyward from her decks, licking to her mast-heads, falling and shooting upward again and still higher.

Then suddenly a mass of smoke and flame erupted from her holds, followed a minute later by the sound of a heavy explosion rolling across the intervening space of water. As though some unseen hand had reached out and swept them away, masts and rigging disappeared. But the fire blazed on, more furiously than before.

A N hour passed, then two, than abruptly Tom's attention was drawn to a barge coming alongside the Merrimac.

"Replacements reporting for duty," a voice shouted out of the darkness as she nosed in and made fast.

Jeb gripped Tom's arm and pointed to a tall, broad-shouldered figure standing in the bow.

"Lieutenant Tennent," he fairly hissed. "Now what in the hell is he doing here?"

Tom watched Tennent climb aboard, every nerve and muscle in his body suddenly taut as wire. In the excitement he'd forgotten all about his enemy.

"I still think he's up to no good," Tom answered shortly. "I'll stake my life on that."

"Still no proof," Jeb growled. "You can't report him."

Tom shook his head. "We'll have to watch him every second he's on board, though. Go below and find out where he's stationed."

Jeb was gone for twenty minutes. "Port broadside, gun two," he reported when he returned.

"You better get some sleep while I watch," Tom ordered. "I'll call you in two hours."

They went below together. Tennent was sitting on his gun-carriage, peering through the port hole at the burning Congress. His handsome, sharp-featured face was set grimly.

"Wake me in two hours," Jeb said and stretching out on the deck beside their gun, dropped quickly off to sleep.

But Tennent didn't move from his position on the carriage and Tom let his friend sleep through to daylight when the call to arms suddenly beating through the ship, brought him bounding to his feet. An angry look crossed his freckled face. But before he could say anything the Merrimac trembled. Engines throbbed, bells clanged and within a few minutes after the sun rose she hoisted her anchor and steamed down the channel toward the stranded Minnesota. Gun-crews stood tense and waiting beside their loaded cannon. Tom watched the Minnesota draw near. She was less than a mile away now.

Then, without any warning, a strange-looking boat darted out from behind the frigate. Tom stared at it in amazement as a shout suddenly rang out:

"The Monitor!"

Just those two words and instantly gun-crews deserted their positions, crowding to the ports to peer in consternation at this new enemy. Officers called them back to their stations. Order was quickly restored but a new feeling of tenseness gripped the gun-deck.

Jeb grunted. "Won't take long to blow that thing out of the water."

But Tom shook his head frowningly. "That's where you're wrong," he said. "The Monitor is more powerful than we are. She's got two 11-inch guns and her turret revolves, allowing her to fire in any direction. She's fast and she's made out of the best materials money could buy."

With a roar the Merrimac's bow pivot opened fire on the Minnesota. Answering shots thundered from the frigate. But Tom kept his eyes on the Monitor. She was bearing down on them swiftly. Even as he watched he saw her turret revolving, saw her ports swing open and the muzzles of her guns nose out. She was less than a hundred yards away, then fifty-forty, coming up alongside.

"Fire!"

Almost as one the Merrimac's broadside guns exploded. For a second Tom wondered if anything could withstand that furious blast. Then the smoke cleared away and he saw the Monitor had come in until her bow almost touched the Merrimac's sides. There were dents in her armor where the balls had hit. Otherwise she was undamaged.

Then her 11-inch rifles vomited smoke and flame. Tom felt himself hurled to the deck, saw his gun-crew go down, sprawling along the boards. The concussion against the Merrimac's side was as great as though the shells had exploded within her gun-deck. For a moment Tom lay stunned. Something wet and sticky was running down over his mouth and chin. More of it seeping down the sides of his neck. He put a hand up. It came away red and he suddenly realized he was bleeding at the nose and ears.

WITH an effort Tom rose to his feet. The gun-crew was staggering up, all of them bleeding as he was. Shaking his head savagely Tom stared at the bulkhead beside him. It was splintered, had buckled inward a good six inches under the force of the blow.

"Another in the same place," Jeb growled, "and it's goodby for us."

Tom nodded grimly. Another shell like the first would penetrate, he knew.

But a glance through the port showed him the Monitor backing slowly away. Then she darted forward again and slid from view astern. The aft pivot opened fire, then the port broadside and Tom gritted his teeth fiercely. The Monitor was running circles around them, he realized. Her 11-inch shells were bursting against the Merrimac's sides, jarring them with their heavy concussions. Every minute Tom expected one to pierce the armor.

An hour passed, but only twice in that time did the Monitor come within range of the starboard guns. Then abruptly the Merrimac shuddered and came to a jarring halt. Bells clanged loudly from below-decks and Tom could feel the vessel throbbing as both engines raced at top speed. But the Merrimac didn't move.

"We're aground," Jeb shouted above the roaring cannonade.

Hardly had he finished speaking when the Monitor came into view less than fifty yards away. Her turret swung around and her ports opened. Tom flung a look at the bulkhead beside him. The next second he was sprawling along the deck on his back. All around him men lay cursing, knocked down by the shock of those exploding shells.

Tom staggered up, saw where the bulk-

head had given away less than six feet from the first break. The Monitor was trying for the same place, he realized grimly. He felt dazed, stunned by the blast. His nose was bleeding again. And there was a loud roaring noise in his ears.

With desperation showing in every line of their taut, blood-smeared faces the crew loaded the gun, sprang back as it went off with a roar, leaped forward again to ram home another charge. Their half-naked bodies were streaked with sweat and powder-smoke.

For what seemed an age the Monitor kept her position there, slamming shell after shell into the Merrimac's side.

Then a shout went up and Tom felt the Merrimac moving as she backed off the bar and swung around and went forward again in an effort to ram the enemy. But the Monitor slid away from in front of her nose and came up on her port side.

Tom ran a trembling hand across his brow. Then suddenly every nerve and muscle in his body snapped taut. In the excitement of the moment he'd forgotten all about Lieutenant Carl Tennent. Now as his gaze flashed across the gun-deck he saw that Tennent was not at his post on the port side. He was gone.

Sudden apprehension knifed through Tom. With a word to Jeb he turned and strode forward along the deck, peering to right and to left in search of the lieutenant.

But he was nowhere in sight and Tom's feeling of apprehension was suddenly doubled. Going below he searched the officers' quarters and the engine-room. On his way to the crew's quarters he passed the powder magazine. The heavy wooden door was ajar. The place seemed deserted momentarily, unguarded.

But suddenly Tom heard a faint noise inside. Stepping quickly to the door, he pushed it open. One glance into the semi-darkness of the interior showed him the racks of powder-kegs lining three sides of the room to the ceiling, showed him the figure of a man kneeling in the center of the floor. It was Lieutenant Tennent.

For one split second Tom hesitated there on the threshold. Tennent had smashed in the heads of several kegs on one of the lower racks, made a train of black powder to the spot where he was kneeling. In his hands was an old flintlock pistol.

Like a flash it dawned on Tom that Tennent was preparing to blow up the ship. He'd been right. Tennent was a Union spy.

THEN Tom was springing into the room with an angry shout. But even as he did the pistol in Tennent's hand flashed fire. And all in the same breath the powder-train flared, sputtering across the room toward the broken kegs.

Springing up, Tennent whirled with a snarl of fury. His face in the yellow light was pale as death and vaguely at the back of his mind Tom realized that the other had resigned himself to be blown up with the ship. There wouldn't have been time for him to escape. There wasn't time now. Just a few seconds. Then they'd all be blown to hell, Tom thought wildly and hurled himself on Tennent. Every ounce of his one hundred and ninety pounds of bone and solid muscle were behind the blow he aimed at the other's jaw.

But Tennent side-stepped quickly, caught Tom off balance. With a short, chopping motion he brought his pistol down on his head. Stars exploded before Tom's eyes and he staggered and went to his knees. A fist smashed his jaw. A boot-toe jabbed into his stomach, brought a wave of nausea gagging into his throat. Then that gun-barrel again, clubbing him to the floor viciously. Tom felt himself sliding off into unconsciousness.

But even as his senses began to leave him, he fought to rise to his feet. Every nerve-fibre in his body was crying out for him to get up and stop that fuse from reaching the powder-kegs. Dimly he was aware that the ship and the lives of every man on board were in his hands now. He couldn't let them die. Those words were roaring through his head. Over and over. He couldn't let them die. He couldn't lose consciousness and let them down like that.

Desperately Tom fought against the wall of blackness closing in on him. Gritting his teeth he lunged to his feet, lashed out furiously with both fists. He felt his knuckles crack against a bone-hard jaw, stepped in behind the blows, arms pumping like pistons. New hope surged up within him. He dabbed a look at the powder-train.

Almost as he did it, he knew it was a

mistake to take his eyes off his adversary. Springing forward, Tennent seized him around the neck and hurled him to the floor. Tom landed on his back. But in a flash he was rolling along the boards to the powder-train, scattering it with his hands. It died and for a moment he thought it was out.

Then, suddenly, it flared up again and all in the same breath Tennent's body crashed down on his back. Tennent's fists pounded his neck and head, slamming his face against the floor with stunning force. Tom's fingers clawed at the burning fuse. But he couldn't reach it now. It was sputtering swiftly toward the kegs.

With a furious wrench Tom rolled over on his back, tried to wriggle out from under Tennent's body. It seemed hours that they'd been fighting there in the semi-darkness. But he knew it was only a matter of seconds. Tennent's fists were whipping into his face. It felt like a piece of raw beef now. One eye was closed. His mouth was puffed and swollen.

Reaching up, Tom's fingers closed about Tennent's throat, gouging into the other's wind-pipe. Tennent reared back. But Tom hung on. With every ounce of his failing strength, he tightened his grip. At the same time he tried to pivot his body around so he could reach the powder-train with his feet.

With a snarl of fury, Tennent clawed at Tom's fingers clamped about his throat. He was choking and gasping for breath, struggling furiously to gain his feet.

Tom flung a glance over his shoulder. The fuse was within a few feet of the kegs now. Once it reached them the Merrimac would be blown out of the water, he thought dully. Every man on board would be killed.

Then, suddenly, Tennent's struggles began to weaken. A surge of hope flashed through Tom. Tennent's blows were losing their force. In another few seconds he would be out of the fight for good. But every second counted now. Out of the corner of his eyes Tom saw the ribbon of fire had almost reached the powder-kegs.

Then abruptly, with a low gurgling sound, Tennent's body went limp, sprawling across Tom's chest like a sack of meal. Gritting his teeth, Tom wriggled out from underneath, rolled to his hands and knees

and all in the same swift motion flung himself headlong on the powder-train. Desperately he beat at the sizzling grains, brushed them away from the kegs with his hands. He was hardly aware of their searing his fingers. He felt numb all over. The last one sizzled and died.

BUT Tom lay there, tense and still, waiting for the fire to break out again. Seconds ticked by. Overhead he could hear the crash and roar of cannon.

Then slowly the tenseness went out of him and his head fell forward on his arms and he lay there weak and gasping for breath. He was beaten to a pulp. He felt sick with nausea and pain and fatigue.

But at a sudden noise behind him, Tom staggered to his feet and whirled, fists rising automatically to continue the fight.

"Hold it!" a voice snapped. "It's me! Jeb!"

Tom shook his head fiercely to clear away the mists, tried to focus his bloodshot eyes on Jeb McGee standing there just inside the doorway, staring down at Tennent's sprawled-out body in surprise.

"What's been going on here?" the little sergeant gasped.

Swiftly Tom told him. Jeb whistled.

"I figured you might need some help and followed you down," he said. "Tennent dead?"

Tom knelt beside the other's body, felt his pulse. He rose to his feet with a brief nod.

"Killed in action," he said frowning. "That'd better be our story, Jeb. Bringing it all out that he was a spy won't do any good now and it might hurt some people we know."

"Ann and her father?"

Tom merely shrugged. "Let's get him out of here before someone comes along and asks a lot of questions."

Picking Tennent's body up by the head and feet, they carried him to the gun-deck and laid him near some dead soldiers that had been dragged back out of the way. The gun-deck was thick with powder-smoke. Men cursed as they slaved at their posts. The port broadside was firing at top speed. Several wounded lay groaning on the deck.

Tom found his gun crew waiting tensely for the chance to use their cannon. They looked at him curiously. His uniform was

streaked with blood. His hands were blistered. His face was in shreds.

Tom went to the port and peered out. The battle was still raging furiously on all sides. Shells were exploding against the Merrimac's iron sides. The thunder of the cannonade from the ships and shore batteries throbbed in his ears.

Then abruptly the Monitor slipped into sight astern and Tom sprang back. A second later his gun exploded. Hardly had the smoke cleared away when it roared again. Then a wild voice shouted from somewhere behind him.

"The Monitor's withdrawing! The battle's over! We've won!"

Tom peered through the swirling smoke-clouds, saw the Monitor steaming away down Hampton Roads. And almost instantly came the order.

"Cease firing!"

As the roar of the cannonade died away into silence the gun-crews looked at each other questioningly. Here and there a man slumped to the deck in exhaustion.

"You better get the surgeon to patch you up," Jeb said anxiously.

Tom shook his head. "Plenty of others need it worse than I do," he answered. "I'm all right."

FOR an hour they waited at their gun-stations. The Monitor had withdrawn to a position near the Minnesota. Some of her crew had come out on deck. Then at last, when there was no sign of her coming back to renew the fray, the battered Merrimac turned and limped tiredly back toward Norfolk. From the top deck Tom and Jeb watched the cheering crowds lining the shore as they steamed slowly up the Elizabeth River. The sight of all those cheering soldiers gave Tom a savage thrill.

Then they drew near the Navy Yard and he saw Ann Wyman and her father standing on the dock. With them was another officer and several marines. Ann waved.

"Where's Lieutenant Tennent?" Colonel Wyman barked when Tom stood before them a few minutes later. "He's under arrest."

Tom started. Ann was staring up at his bruised face in horror.

"Arrest?" Tom echoed. "What do you mean?"

"We found papers in his quarters proving our suspicions that he was a spy."

Tom could only stare at the colonel dazedly. "You had suspicions he was a spy?"

Wyman smiled tiredly. "We suspected him long before you did but lacking any definite proof we were forced to adopt a waiting and watching course. You almost ruined our plans that night when you accused him point-blank of being a spy. Both Ann and I hated to do it but we had to clamp down on you, Tom. You see, we were acting in conjunction with Major Williams here of the Intelligence and we had orders to keep the whole thing a secret. But where's Tennent?"

Tom drew a long deep breath and glanced at Jeb. No need to hide the facts now, he thought. In a few words he told what had happened.

"I had no intention of killing him," he concluded. "I was about done in myself, and I guess I wasn't reasoning too clearly. All I could think of was what would happen if he overpowered me, and was able to return to his suicidal task. When—when I found he was dead, I intended to tell you he had been killed in action, thinking it would quiet the scandal that would inevitably result if the real facts were known. I had no idea you suspected him all along. I thought that—" he paused, then finished lamely, "well—that's about all, I guess."

Wyman's face was grave when he finished. "He slipped away from us last night and had himself transferred to the Merrimac. If his plan had succeeded it would have meant—"

He broke off with a shake of his head. Tom looked at Ann and a sudden smile broke through the look of horror and anxiety on his face. She put a hand through his arm and clung to him tightly.

"Let's not even think of it," she said softly. "It's all over now. Carl was our enemy, but he died like a soldier—bravely."

Tom's hand closed over hers as she clung to his arm. His gaze went past her to the iron-clad tied up alongside the dock and all at once a feeling of pride surged through him—for Ann—and for the battered Merrimac which had fought so gallantly in the service of the Confederacy.

"Charge!" he shouted, brandishing his sabre. The blue-clad Irish dashed up the slope toward the house, battling to stem the tide of death that spewed from the rifles of the Johnny Rebs.



Wert

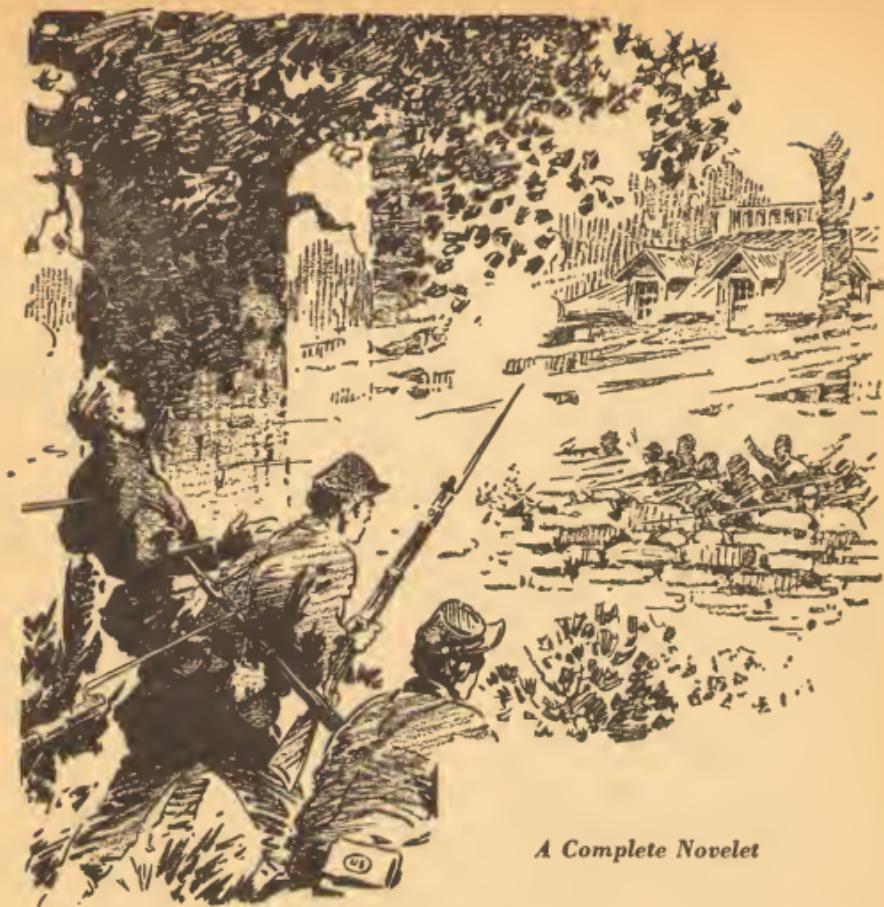
Captain Sabre

By JOHN WIGGIN

THE colonel of the Ninety-ninth New York Regiment looked sourly at the latest addition to his corps of officers.

"Captain Ridley," he said to the tall, elegant young man before him, "I need officers badly. I lost all but one company

commander at Antietam, and the replacements have been very slow coming in since then. But, by Heaven, sir, I don't see how a civilian like yourself, fresh from the luxuries of Fifth Avenue society life, with only six weeks' military training, can be of the slightest use! There is nothing I



A Complete Novelet

It was John Ridley, Fifth Avenue's gilded darling, who captained that jeering company of hard-boiled Irish out of Warrenton. But across the bloody Rappahannock, surrounded by the grim-jawed legions of the Gray, it was John Ridley, fighting devil, who led his tattered band into the flame-rimmed jaws of hell.

can do, of course. You are a rich man and you have bought yourself a commission. You have been sent to me and I must put you in charge of a company, but, by the Lord, sir, I feel sorry for you!"

John Ridley fought down an inclination to come out with an insulting rejoinder. He was in the army now, he realized.

"Let me tell you what you're up against," the colonel pursued, "this regiment is composed almost entirely of immigrants from the West of Ireland. They're good men on the attack, brave to the point of recklessness. But they don't know the meaning of discipline. Since Antietam, Company H, your company, has been

temporarily under a sergeant named Bogue—as fine a desperado as ever trod a Roscommon bog. He'll resent you, as will all the men, so you'll have that to contend with. It is the more unfortunate for you that the Army of the Potomac is leaving Warrenton tomorrow morning early and moving on Richmond. You will have small opportunity to impress them with your ability to command before you may have to lead them into action."

Ridley's patrician face wore a cool, handsome mask which concealed his irritation at the West Pointer's forthright words. He saluted lazily.

"I will do my best, sir," he drawled, "to

overcome the deficiencies which you have so clearly perceived and pointed out."

"Yes—er, quite," said the colonel, with a suspicious glance. "Sergeant Bogue should be outside, ready to take you along to Company H. Dismissed."

A moment later, Ridley faced a blue-chinned giant of a man who lounged forward with a sloppy salute.

"Sergeant Bogue, sorr," the man growled, "Company H is ready to stand inspection f'r the cap'n."

Ridley ignored the sergeant's surly tone, and offered his hand with a pleasant smile.

"Glad to know you, Sergeant," he said, cordially. "I'm told you have been doing a fine job with the company, in the absence of any commissioned officer. You can help me a great deal in the future, with your superior experience and training."

Bogue shot a surprised glance at the young captain, and then looked away with a secretive smile. Ridley interpreted the smile as one of condescension. Yes, Ridley thought, the problem of discipline may be as tough as the colonel predicted. So, as he strolled along beside the burly sergeant, he decided to cast aside the ordinary rules of military conduct and meet the situation in his own way.

Company H, drawn up ready for inspection, as Sergeant Bogue had said, was, if anything, worse than Ridley had expected. They looked like a band of brigands. But the new captain betrayed no surprise. He strolled casually along the ragged, unwashed ranks and seemed not to notice the unsoldierly appearance of his men. They were like a roomful of naughty schoolchildren, deliberately setting out to bait a new teacher. They slouched in uneven lines, blouses unbuttoned, equipment untidy and dirty, rifles held in varying free interpretations of the command, Parade Rest.

But Ridley, looking very debonair in his fresh uniform, concluded his inspection without comment to any individuals, and walked out in front of the company. He regarded them for a moment with a cool smile, and then with a few words dismissed them. But those few words stung to the quick.

"Men of Company H," he said, mildly, "I am proud to be your new commander,

and I am also sorrowful. Because I know that in the very next engagement with the enemy, most of you will be killed—and not by enemy bullets." Ridley paused to let this sink in. Then he snapped: "Without close inspection I can see that the condition of your rifles is such that if you attempted to fire them, you would blow your own heads off. Some of you may profit by my remarks and clean your guns thoroughly. The others—I am sorry for. Company dismissed."

An early mess call found a hundred and fifty puzzled Irishmen busily engaged in cleaning and oiling their rifles. And that night Company H behaved itself remarkably well, there being a minimum of the usual boisterous horseplay.

EARLY the next morning the Army of the Potomac, and Company H with it, broke camp and marched southward along the road from Warrenton to Falmouth. There were trying hours ahead for the new captain as the vast army under its new general, Burnside, progressed in the direction of Richmond by fits and starts. There were constant long delays along the line of march and the Ninety-ninth New York, far to the rear, was hardly out of Warrenton before nightfall. Company H groused and grumbled—none louder than Sergeant Bogue—but Ridley was everywhere among them. He held to his democratic attitude, chaffing and joking, and the Irish eventually discovered that the quickest witted among them were no quicker than their new captain.

The regiment passed the night impatiently and received the order to march the next morning with cheers. The date was December 13, 1862. All morning Ridley marched at the head of his company, excitement mounting in his breast. He wondered whether he would see action that day. The army was rolling southward with considerable speed and determination. Some time or other it must meet resistance. It wasn't possible that Lee and the Confederate Army would let Burnside move on unmolested to Richmond.

Scores of rumors were passed up and down the dusty blue columns of marching men. One of them had Lee concentrating on the south side of the Rappahannock at Fredericksburg. Later rumors predicted

that Lee would give battle there rather than allow the Union Army to go any farther southward.

By noon the advance of the army slowed down appreciably. There were frequent halts, and the road and the fields along the route became more and more clogged with troops. The rumors grew wilder as the men in blue fidgeted and speculated as to the cause of the delays. One rumor persisted to the effect that the advance guard was held up, unable to cross the Rappahannock because there were no boats.

Presently the Ninety-ninth left the road and marched over a mile across fields to their right. Rumor about the lack of boats grew still stronger and to John Ridley it sounded quite plausible. The rear guard could not advance when thousands of men ahead of them were blocked by a river. Suddenly the sound of distant cannonading was heard, and automatically the chatter hushed in the dusty blue ranks. Soon afterward, the word began to circulate that the Rebels had been seen across the river.

The cannonading increased in intensity, and the men of the Ninety-ninth told each other that the Union batteries were bombarding the Rebs to cover the advance of the infantry. But soon afterward a battery of Parrott guns went dashing past, and it was learned that the Union guns were not yet even in position. The cannonading was all being done by Confederate guns.

Soon, a stream of wounded began to appear, and snatches of an ominous story began to circulate. The crossing was being made—by boats and otherwise—but in the face of a murderous artillery fire from the bluffs on the other side of the river. The Union Army was getting to the other side of the Rappahannock, but in small groups at a time, and they were taking fearful losses.

Eventually, a courier on a lathered horse dashed up to the Ninety-ninth, a series of hurried commands were bawled, and a moment later the regiment was going forward on the double. As they drew nearer and nearer the river, the roar of guns became deafening.

Finally they arrived at the crest of the bluffs on the north side of the Rappahannock, and scrambled down through the underbrush to the shore. Ridley, bringing

up the rear with Company H, paused for a moment as he was leading his men past a Union battery that was hastily being set up. The scene below him was appalling.

The bluffs across the river were a wall of flame for miles, as the Confederate artillery threw an unceasing rain of grape and canister down onto the water. Down at the river's edge, there was a scene of the wildest confusion as a pitifully small number of boats were loaded to the gunwales with men in blue, and then pushed out for the opposite shore. And only a scattered remnant of those boats made the trip across safely.

Ridley halted the company momentarily on the edge of the bluff, and surveyed the scene. An artilleryman ran over to him.

"You'd better keep moving," he cried. "Johnny Reb has got the range of us here—three out of four guns gone, an' we're moving the last gun out, right now."

Ridley thanked him and got his column into motion. But not straight down to the shore. He reasoned that if the Confederates had silenced a battery they would not continue to shell that location any further. He led Company H along the crest of the bluff, upstream. As they went past the dismantled Union guns, surrounded by dead and dying men and horses, Ridley was struck with an idea.

HE drew most of the company back out of sight under the trees, and detailed a squad to cut away the rope traces from the horses, lying in the wreckage of the three gun-caissons. While that was being done, he ran down alone to the river's edge. There he found the colonel of the Ninety-ninth, wild-eyed over the problem of how to get a regiment across a river with only two small boats at his disposal. When Ridley asked permission to take Company H farther upstream, and guaranteed to make the crossing without boats, the colonel nodded gratefully, and the young captain scrambled up the bluff back to his men.

"Men," he snapped, "we're going to cross that river. Follow me."

The men of Company H trotted westward at the heels of their captain, until they had reached a point beyond the extreme left wing of the Confederate batteries. Ridley detailed a squad to knot to-

gether the numerous lengths of rope that had been cut away from the artillery horses, and in a shake the squad turned up with one long and fairly strong rope which conceivably would span the river.

Ridley nodded his head in satisfaction and barked: "I want a man who's a good swimmer."

A stocky, black-haired private asserted that he could swim like a shark. O'Neill was his name, and he proceeded to make good his boast by swimming the Rappahannock with one end of the long rope tied around his middle. Ridley heaved a sigh of relief when the man reached the other side. The rope was long enough and to spare.

Both ends of the rope were securely fastened to trees on each side of the river, and Ridley led his company triumphantly across, clinging to the downstream side and going along the rope hand over hand. Each man had strapped his ammunition pouch on top of his head, and slung his musket muzzle down. It was a wet and shivering crew of Irishmen who finally assembled on the south side of the Rappahannock, but their powder was dry, and after a few minutes' oiling, their muskets were ready for action.

The crossing had gone unnoticed by the Confederates until the last dozen men were swinging into shore. The nearest Confederate battery began dropping some canister into the water near them, but before they could get the range Company H had reached dry land without the loss of a man.

Immediately, Ridley led them downstream to join the rest of the regiment that was dribbling across, six men at a time, in the two small boats. As Company H hurried along, they saw a cannon ball hit one of the boats squarely. Over the roar of the guns, Ridley heard a yell of triumph from the bluffs above. Abruptly he halted.

"Insanity!" he muttered. "Napoleon himself couldn't lead an army across that river successfully in the face of those guns. He would never have tried it in the first place."

He looked up at the guns above him belching death and destruction out onto the Rappahannock, then he looked back at his company of dripping Irishmen.

"This may be disobeying orders," he told himself, "and it may be nothing more than foolhardiness, but I am going to silence some of those guns."

He raised his sword and pointed to the bluff—it was useless to try and make himself heard over the din of the cannonade. But the Irish understood his gesture. Their eyes widened for a moment in awe, then their jaws set grimly, and they turned right and started climbing through the undergrowth.

They were more than halfway up before the Confederate gunners discovered them, and then it was too late. The artillerymen couldn't depress the muzzles of their cannon low enough to bring the toiling Union troops within range, and they were unprotected by their own infantry. A few scattered rifle shots were fired as the gunners yelled for help and picked up ramrods to defend themselves.

As Ridley gained the crest, he was gasping for breath but his whole mind and body were afire with excitement. He brandished his sabre with a cry and the Irish poured after him. A fleeting thought went through Ridley's mind—that here, in his first combat, there was no time to think, to be afraid. There was time only for action. A bearded Confederate lunged viciously at him with a short gunner's sword. Ridley chopped down at the man with his sabre and hurdled the falling body. Behind him the Irish swarmed in among the guns with bayonets flourished.

IN five minutes the gun crews of eight cannon were killed or dispersed. Quickly, Ridley ordered the caissons pushed to the edge of the bluff and rolled down. Then, seeing that a Confederate battery two hundred yards farther along toward Fredericksburg was being turned around so that the guns would train on his men, he ordered a quick dash inland to the cover of some woods.

Temporarily safe, he collected the men around him and paused to consider the situation. The Irish gaped admiringly at their captain as he called the roll. They had lost but seven men out of their original hundred and fifty, and as far as they knew, they had done as much damage to the enemy as the rest of the Union Army put together.

"Men!" Ridley shouted, "if we try to go back to the river now, we will be shot to pieces. So instead, we'll just keep going the other way, and make a raid on the Confederate rear."

Even Sergeant Bogue joined the cheer that followed that announcement, and Ridley led a cautious movement through the woods toward the rear of the Confederate position.

A few minutes' careful progress brought the little force to a narrow, dusty road that ran parallel to the Rappahannock. Ridley peered up and down the road and finding no signs of life, ordered his company across it on the double. The Irish scrambled over, feeling like truant schoolboys, and ducked into the woods on the other side.

No sooner were they under cover than one of those lulls came in the noisy cannonade. Ridley pricked up his ears at the sound of a drum. He crawled back toward the road on his belly, and watched a long column of Confederate infantry swinging eastward toward Fredericksburg. The picture of those lean, hard-eyed men passing him, unconscious of the presence of the little Union force, made Ridley realize more than ever that Company H of the Ninety-ninth New York was in the position of an audacious fox, trotting around in the midst of a vast pack of hounds.

It would be well, Ridley thought, to move a little farther away from the center of the Rebel concentration where he might find smaller groups of the enemy to attack. Accordingly, Company H prowled westward through the woods. As the sounds of the battle were diminishing, Ridley halted the Company at the edge of a broad, brown field which sloped up to a beautiful white mansion. In front of the classic columns of the plantation house a score of men in butternut-gray were lolling.

Ridley considered the situation.

"Now if I were a typical Union officer," he told himself, "I would gaily lead a charge across the open field, losing most of my men, but showing my great gallantry. However, I think I shall investigate that force up there and find out how strong it is."

Sergeant Bogue touched Ridley's elbow. "It's a covey of sittin' birrds, Cap'n. Are we goin' to attack?"

Ridley shook his head impatiently. "No, Sergeant," he replied, "you will take ten men and go around the edge of the field, keeping yourself hidden. Find out how many Johnny Rebs there are and report back to me as soon as possible."

Bogue saluted sullenly, and strode away on his mission. He returned in less than half an hour.

"There's a hunnerd Confed'rates scattered about the house, Cap'n," he reported. "Whatcha gonna do?"

Swiftly, Ridley formulated his strategy. He led the company around to the rear of the mansion to a point in the woods where there was less than a hundred yards of open field intervening. Then he called for five volunteers to detach themselves from the company, and show themselves in plain view of the Confederates in front of the mansion.

The plan worked perfectly. As the Confederates caught sight of Ridley's decoys, they gave an astonished yell and poured down the field in hot pursuit. The five decoys sprinted for the cover of the trees and the rest of Company H quietly took possession of the plantation. A handful of Confederates who had stayed behind were quickly disposed of, but the scattered rifle shots attracted the attention of the rest of the Confederates.

"Now!" Ridley said, "we'll let them do the attacking."

Sure enough, the Confederates charged gallantly up the slope, giving the shrill Rebel yell. The Irish held their fire until the last minute, and then opened up with deadly effect. In a few minutes it was all over. Twenty-six men in gray were taken prisoners, some thirty-odd were fatally wounded. The rest had been killed.

Company H lost nine men.

THE battle still raged over Fredericksburg, but the sun was low in the sky when John Ridley heaved a satisfied sigh and started for the front door of the white mansion. Working at top speed, Company H had disposed of the bodies of the dead, carried the wounded into the barn, and then had hidden themselves among the cabins of the field Negroes in the rear. By a miracle, no other Confederates had put in an appearance. Not a bad day's work, Ridley thought. And now to see

if the owners of this place are at home. He rapped smartly on the front door. An old Negro in tarnished livery opened the door silently, and, bowing, pointed in the direction of an arched doorway. Ridley stepped through it into a long, high-ceilinged room whose furniture was shrouded in white sheets, giving it a ghostly aspect. A slender, brown-haired girl stood in the center of the room and stared wide-eyed at the tall Union officer. Ridley swept his uniform cap off with a low bow.

"My deepest apologies, Ma'am," he said, "for any inconvenience I may have caused you or your esteemed family by bringing the war to your back door, so to speak."

The girl did not answer for a moment, but her little fists clenched at her side and she turned her wide brown eyes to the old Negro.

"Pompey," she said suddenly, "will you tell this Northe'n person that I have no desire to have any con've'sation with him?"

Ridley sighed. She was a very pretty girl.

"I understand how you must feel, Ma'am," he said mildly, "and I will try to cause you as little trouble as possible. But in the pursuit of my duty, I must make an announcement and make a request. Am I speaking to the head of the family?"

"Pompey," said the girl sharply, "please tell this—this Yankee that I am Mary Lupton, and that I am alone in this house. Tell him, Pompey, that he can announce and request and be damned!"

"Please, Ma'am," said Ridley plaintively, "you are making it most difficult for me. It is my duty to announce that any Negro slaves on these premises are hereby freed. I request, Ma'am, permission to collect eggs, and kill chickens from your poultry house, to feed my men. I will give you a receipt for what is taken, and when the war is over you will be indemnified. I assure you, Miss Lupton, that you will not be otherwise molested, and that doubtless we shall take our departure some time before tomorrow morning."

"Heaven be thanked," said the girl, and a ghost of a smile came to her lips. "Pompey! Did you hear what the Yankee said? You are free. You don't belong to me any more."

"Not ol' Pompey," said the Negro emphatically, "not dis yere old nigga. I ain' go' be freed. Dey can take ol' Pompey and kill him off, he still belong to you, Miss Mary."

Ridley felt a momentary confusion. He had gone to war for the express purpose of destroying slavery, and yet here was one slave who stoutly resisted the idea of being freed.

"Well, Miss Lupton," he said soberly, "I shall not detain you further. I have made my announcement, and my request. If your slaves do not wish to be freed, it is no further concern of mine. I trust I have your permission to enter your poultry house?"

The girl looked stonily at him, and made no answer. Ridley waited a moment, and then made a low bow.

"Captain Ridley, at your service, Ma'am," he said, and turned on his heel and strode out of the room.

Back among his men, he curtly ordered a detail to raid the chicken house, but insisted that a strict account be kept of the eggs and fowl that were taken. Then, as the pale sun disappeared from the wintry western sky, he sat down, apart from his men, to consider his next move. The guns still boomed around Fredericksburg, and idly Ridley wondered whether Burnside had gained a footing yet. It seemed unimportant, somehow. In spite of the guns, Burnside and the Army of the Potomac seemed remote. The thought uppermost in his mind, now, was that he, John Ridley, proud and wealthy, the darling of Fifth Avenue Society, had been thoroughly and beautifully snubbed by a slip of a Rebel girl.

In the gathering darkness of the chilly evening, Sergeant Bogue's voice drifted over to him. Ridley could not make out the words, but the tone was complaining. Ridley called to him.

"We will spend the night here, Sergeant," he said as Bogue's hulking figure loomed over him. "I will depend on you to post plenty of sentinels. We must light no fires except one in that cook house to prepare our evening meal. You will, of course, guard the prisoners with exceptional care, because if any of them got away, they would most certainly lead their comrades back here in force."

BOGUE moved away toward the men and began mumbling orders. Ridley leaned back against the base of a tree, stretched his legs, and lost himself in thought. The guns continued to roar to the eastward, but the distant noise somehow only served to emphasize the quietness which hung over the plantation. Ridley realized that he was very tired—and well he might be, after the exertions of the day. He thought of the men, and thought that they, too, must be tired. He wondered if the privates who would be detailed to sentry duty would be able to resist the temptation to sleep at their posts. And with that thought, Ridley knew that there could be no sleep for him that night, that he must tirelessly make the rounds of the sentry posts himself.

He got up with a grunt and walked over to inspect the Confederate prisoners. Satisfied that they were properly guarded, he turned away as a disquieting thought crossed his mind. What was to prevent the hostile little Southern girl from fleeing the plantation herself or sending the old Negro to find some Confederate soldiers? It was a detail he had completely forgotten.

He walked around to the front of the mansion and was reassured by the sight of a light shining through a window on the ground floor. A puzzling murmur of voices came from within the house, men's voices. Ridley tiptoed toward the lighted window and peered inside. It was the room with the shrouded furniture, and in the middle of it stood Sergeant Bogue and two privates of Company H. The two privates had the old Negro, Pompey, between them, bending his skinny arms up behind his back. The old man's face was gray, and the sweat stood out in beads on his forehead. Mary Lupton, to one side, staring up into the face of Bogue, completed the startling tableau.

"There is no money, I tell you," the girl said through clenched teeth, "and we buried no silver. There was no time to hide anything. If youah inclination is to loot, I can't stop you-all from carrying off anything you may find in the house. It is what one would expect from you thieving brutes of Northe'ners. I knew I couldn't trust that captain of yours for all his false airs and graces."

Bogue gave an evil chuckle, and started to put his arm around the girl's waist, when a voice came from the doorway.

"That's enough of that, Sergeant," said John Ridley quietly.

Bogue let the girl go, and whirled around; his eyes were cruel slits in his craggy face.

"So ye came shpyin' afther us, Cap'n," he said slowly.

"Unloose the old man," Ridley commanded the privates, and then turned sleepy eyes on Bogue. "I could court-martial you, Sergeant, for this, or I needn't bother to wait for that. I could shoot you down like a dog. But I'll do neither. You're a good soldier when you feel like it, and I need good soldiers right now. So take off your blouse, Sergeant Bogue, because I'm going to give you just about the grandest thrashing you ever had."

Bogue's little eyes flickered in wonderment.

"If I lifted me hand to an orf'cer I'd be court-martialed, anyways," he said, adding craftily, "if the incident were dish-covered."

But Ridley was stripping off his coat with its captain's ensignia.

"I'm not your officer now, Bogue," he said; "this is man to man. Guard yourself."

IN the carefree, elegant life Ridley had always lived in New York, one of his hobbies was boxing, a pastime in which he had developed considerable skill. But Colin Bogue did not know that. All the big Irishman could see was a tall, slender young man who could be crushed with one swing of his great ham-like fist.

The sergeant lunged forward with a stifled bellow and aimed a terrific blow at Ridley's face. But the blow never landed. Ridley ducked under it and snaked out a left. Three lightning-like jabs caught the Irishman in the right eye. Then Ridley whipped across his right and smacked a body blow under Bogue's heart. The Irishman grunted with pain and surprise and took an uncertain step backward. Ridley flicked his left in again twice at the Irishman's face—twisting, cutting blows. Bogue howled and swung a whistling right at his slender opponent's head. But again Ridley wasn't there to receive it.

Desperately, the big Irishman charged again, his thick arms spread out, wide open. *So he wants to wrestle me, does he?* Ridley thought, and stepped in quickly. Before Bogue could close his arms around Ridley's shoulders, the young officer exploded a left uppercut on his stubbly chin. At the same time, he buried his right in Bogue's midriff.

The blows shook the huge Irishman momentarily, and Ridley danced back out of reach. But not quite out of reach. Bogue flung out a fist blindly, and it caught Ridley between the eyes. For a moment, the young officer thought he was done for. His nose felt numb and prickly, and stars danced before his eyes. Instinctively, he held his right in front of his face, and snapped a twisting left into Bogue's rapidly closing right eye.

The Irishman put his hands up to his eyes like a child. Blood was pouring from a half a dozen cuts on his broad countenance. Ridley smashed a right, a hard left hook, and another right to the face. Bogue shivered and staggered backward. Ridley measured the half-blinded Irishman and sent his right crashing on to the point of the heavy jaw. Bogue's knees buckled and his hands fluttered at his sides momentarily. Then he pitched forward, face down, onto the floor, unconscious.

Ridley regarded the prone figure and blew on the knuckles of his right hand. Then he turned on the two awe-stricken privates.

"Take him out," he said briefly. He smiled over at Mary Lupton. "Again I must ask your pardon for creating a disturbance—this time in your own drawing-room."

"If you think to win my approval, suh, by this crude display, you are completely mistaken. I see no reason to thank you for saving me from a situation which I should never have been faced with in the beginning. Pompey! Give the man his coat, and show him to the door."

Ridley stared at her in amazement. He wasn't quite prepared for such an attitude. With compressed lips he took his coat from the old Negro and walked out into the night. So this was Southern gentility! After thinking it over, however, he forgave her. She certainly was going through a nerve-shattering experience, and could

hardly be blamed for being bitter and suspicious at the sight of a blue uniform.

One thing he made up his mind to, though, and that was, that she should not be subjected again to the danger of looting by his men. Therefore, at the conclusion of the evening meal, he called Sergeant Bogue to him.

"Sergeant," he said, "you aren't going to like this and neither are the men, but we're clearing out of here immediately. We'll bivouac overnight in the woods. Have you anything to say?"

"Cap'n," said Bogue, and his deep voice trembled a little, "I've not a worrd to say. Cap'n dear, you're a broth of a bhoy, and I'd folly ye to hell."

"Maybe you will at that, Sergeant," Ridley smiled, "but first you will go up the house, apologize to that young lady, and give her a receipt for all her hens we've eaten."

"The apology will come aisy, sorr, and me with the full belly."

THREE was no grumbling among the men of Company H as they moved away from the Lupton plantation. Or if there was, Ridley did not hear it. Colin Bogue saw to that. His eyes had been figuratively opened at the same time that they were literally closed by Ridley's left jabs.

The guns were still booming at Fredericksburg, and the sky to the east showed intermittent flashes of yellow light. Ridley pondered the idea of going back to the Rappahannock, but in the end decided against it. There was no telling what sleeping battalions of Confederate soldiery he might rouse up. Besides, there was the danger that his prisoners might break bounds and escape if he tried to march very far with them through the pitch-black woods.

The wisdom of this course became apparent when, after a long, uneasy night, Ridley took two privates and went scouting in the gray light of dawn. The cannonading had ceased. The battle of Fredericksburg was evidently over. Two roads lying on either side of the woods in which Company H was hidden were swarming with Confederates. Ridley had no way of knowing that Burnside had suffered a bloody defeat, leaving twelve thousand

Union dead on the banks of the Rappahannock. But from the attitude of the Confederate troops, who sang and whistled gayly as they marched westward, he surmised something near the truth.

"Now just what to do?" he asked himself. "According to tradition, I suppose I would cut my way gallantly through these overwhelming numbers of Johnny Rebs and get across the Rappahannock with a handful of survivors. Frankly, though, I don't think it would be a good idea. For the time being, I think we will just stay hidden until there aren't so many Confederates around, and pray that we aren't discovered before we make a break for the river."

It was past noon when once more the roads were deserted and Ridley decided to try and make the south bank of the Rappahannock. Once there, he figured, the men could strip off their clothes and would be mistaken for a company of Confederates diving for bodies. The company moved off cautiously in a northerly direction. Ridley's chief problem was the group of prisoners, and this problem grew more and more perplexing.

These prisoners were resolute men, strongly averse to being carried out of Virginia by such a puny force of damn Yanks. For hours, they had been kept quiet by the threat of instant death if any of them shouted for help. But now that the company was on the march they grew more and more obstreperous, even though they were still menaced by the guns of the men in blue who surrounded them.

Exercising the utmost care to prevent being seen by any enemies, the company made its way from the shelter of the woods to a point scarcely an eighth of a mile from the river. There remained one road to cross, and before Ridley would permit his men to break cover from the underbrush, he sent scouts far down the road in opposite directions. They returned with the word that nobody was in sight. Company H scrambled across the road and ducked into the bushes on the other side. Ridley was anxiously hastening the rear guard convoying the prisoners when the thundering of hoofs sent a thrill of dismay through him. A squadron of Confederate cavalry was coming up the road at full gallop. Frantically Ridley tried to get his

men out of sight, but the prisoners saw their chance and took it. With a wild yell they broke and ran in all directions. Ridley called to his men to hold their fire, but it was too late. A few scattered shots rang out and the Confederate troopers reined up, shouting. Carbines were whipped out of their buckets and sabres flashed in the sunlight. Quickly, Ridley estimated the strength of the horsemen at about sixty. There was only one thing that could be done, and that was to dispose of this troop and dispose of it quickly.

"Company attack!"

The Irish burst out from the undergrowth with a cheer and fell on the Confederate horsemen with true Celtic fury. Ridley himself leaped with drawn sword at the nearest trooper, parried a swinging sabre slash and thrust hard at the man's side. The trooper gasped as the blade bit deep. He leaned forward, his sabre falling out of his nerveless hand. Ridley ran toward the next horseman, his sword-blade bright red.

THE road was a frenzied scene of carnage. Horses plunged and wheeled, sabres clanged, and the Irish milled about ripping and stabbing with the bayonet. For a minute Ridley thought that Company H was going to come triumphantly out of the encounter. But the Confederates fought like demons and Ridley's heart sank when he heard an eerie, high-pitched scream from up the road. The Rebel yell!

A quick glance over his shoulder told Ridley the worst. A wall of gray-clad infantry was charging down the road. Ridley cursed his luck. It was only too evident that the oncoming infantry far outnumbered his own little force. A fearful vision of Confederate prison camps flashed through Ridley's mind.

He quickly assayed the situation. Most of the Confederate cavalrymen had been killed or unhorsed. He put two fingers in his mouth and gave a shrill whistle. The Irish ran toward him from all sides.

"Every man for himself—scatter into the woods," Ridley shouted. "If you can avoid capture, gather at the plantation—now run!"

Like a covey of quail, Company H ducked into the bushes on either side of the road, leaving a handful of exhausted

Confederate cavalrymen. The main body of infantry was still a hundred yards away.

Ridley was the last to take cover. And as he cast a swift glance around him to see that all his men on their feet had gotten away, a Confederate trooper rode at him furiously. Ridley dodged the plunging hoofs and dashed into the thicket by the roadside. But to his dismay, the Confederate trooper followed close after him. Panting with exhaustion, Ridley hurled himself through the tangled underbrush. A bullet whistled past his ear, and the Rebel horseman pursued relentlessly. Ridley dared not look back. But he knew only too well that the cavalryman was gaining on him steadily. He stumbled on a few paces and then wheeled around to face his pursuer. The horse's foam-flecked muzzle parted the bushes in front of Ridley. The Union officer threw up his sword arm and stabbed desperately at the gray-clad rider. At the same time the Rebel aimed his pistol point-blank at Ridley's chest and fired. Ridley felt as if a sledge-hammer had landed on his left shoulder and his whole left side went numb. He clenched his teeth and nerved himself for a final effort. Once again his blood-caked sabre rose and chopped downward on the Confederate's thigh. The Southerner dropped his pistol with an agonized scream and fell forward over his saddle-horn. Ridley pulled the helpless trooper off his horse, and with a supreme effort swung himself up and into the saddle.

Searing pains were shooting through Ridley's left shoulder now, and a dizzy nausea swept over him in waves. Fighting to retain his consciousness, he urged the horse forward in the direction he was pointing—southward.

How many minutes or hours Ridley traveled on the back of that horse, he could never be sure. All he could be sure of was that his left arm was useless and that the left side of his tunic felt wet and cold. For the rest the pain of his wound kept him in a semi-conscious state during which he had brief, lucid moments when he felt his right hand clinging to the horse's mane in a grip of death. But somehow, through all the mists that surrounded him, he clung to a hope that he could guide the horse to Mary Lupton's plantation.

He was dimly conscious that he had reached his journey's end, and that gentle hands lifted him out of the saddle. . . . When at length he did wake up and became fully conscious, he found himself lying in a bed. A counterpane was drawn up over the lower part of his body to his waist, but from there on up he was bare. He lay for a moment staring at the ceiling, his shoulder throbbing unbearably. He was conscious of another presence in the room. He turned his head slightly and saw Mary Lupton standing over him with a knife in her hand.

"Ah, stoic Southern womanhood!" he whispered. "So you are about to finish off the job that your men couldn't quite accomplish!"

"I am not goin' to do any such thing," said Mary Lupton quietly. "I am just goin' to bandage that shoulder of yours."

Ridley frowned slightly but did not open his eyes. "First aid from the enemy," he muttered, "but why the knife, Miss Lupton?"

"It is the only thing I have left to cut with," was the simple answer. "I gave 'way all my scissors to an army doctor."

Ridley felt a curious impulse to laugh. For some reason the whole situation seemed hilariously funny. Then the pain in his shoulder suddenly became almost unendurable. He heaved a shuddering sigh and hoped he could keep himself from screaming. He must have momentarily lost consciousness, for when he came to again, soft fingers were completing a thorough job of bandaging.

He opened his eyes and looked straight up into Mary Lupton's face. He thought he had never seen such a beautiful face in his life, even though the color had all drained from it and her brown eyes were too wide open.

"Gentle Southern lady," said Ridley softly, "how could you bring yourself to succor me?"

"I would do the same for any human being," said Mary Lupton with dignity. "Besides—"

Just at that moment a thunder of hoofs sounded outside somewhere. Mary Lupton got up swiftly and looked out of the window.

"Here they are," she said briefly. "Confederates?"

Mary nodded. Gathering up her skirts, she ran out of the room. Ridley heard the sharp click of her heels on the stairway and later a confused murmur of voices. What was going to happen now? He wondered if Mary Lupton's solicitude was merely for the purpose of preserving him so that she could turn him over alive to the first Confederate patrol?

It was considerable time before Mary returned, but when she did, her light step on the stairs was accompanied by the clumping of several pairs of cavalry boots. Ridley's heart sank. He had been hoping for the best, but apparently it was not to be. He closed his eyes in complete resignation.

The footsteps, Mary's and the cavalryman's, halted at the doorway to the little room, and Ridley heard Mary's voice in a whisper. "You-all must be very quiet and not disturb him," she said. "He is getting along pretty good because it was a clean wound; the bullet went right on through. He just needs a good rest."

"Well, Ma'am," said a voice with a strong Southwestern drawl, "he sho' do look lak a real Vi'ginia gentleman. He certainly don' look lak that damn Yankee we're huntin'. Now what was his first name again, Ma'am?"

"Stokes," said Mary. "Stokes Lupton. He is my second brother, and his regiment is the Tenth Virginia."

"Fine regiment, Ma'am," the voice answered. "We-all don't know 'em personal, because we-all are Texans."

John Ridley hardly dared to breathe. What would happen if one of those troopers came over and lifted the counterpane and discovered the Union Army breeches? Was it possible that these Texans would take Mary Lupton's word that he was a wounded Confederate officer? But Mary was talking again.

"Well, you know," she was saying, "I thought you-all sounded like Texas gentlemen."

"You are right kind, Ma'am," one of the Texans answered. "We sure do try to act like gentlemen, especially where the women folks is concerned. Now I guess we won't trouble you any more. But if you do hear of that damn Yank, or see him, you be sure and let us know right away, Ma'am."

THE footsteps died away in a profusion of gallantries and when Mary finally came back, Ridley was shaking with silent laughter. Mary looked at him with a faint smile.

"My sakes!" she exclaimed. "I don't see how you can lie there and laugh. I was so scared I could hardly talk. If they had been Virginia men instead of Texans, I declare I don't know what I would have done."

"Ah, don't scold me for laughing, Ma'am," said Ridley. "It was slick the way you kept them out of this room. I guess I'm a little relieved, too. How did I know you weren't just going to turn me over to them?"

"No," said Mary slowly, "I couldn't do that."

"Why couldn't you?" Ridley asked. "After all, I am a hated Yankee."

"I know," Mary nodded, "but you are a helpless man, and furthermore, you're a — a gentleman."

"Thank you," said Ridley simply.

"You rest quiet now," said Mary. "I am going down and fix you some chicken broth."

Ridley smiled after her retreating figure. Her heels clicked down the stairs and died away toward the rear of the great mansion. An idea crossed Ridley's mind. What had the girl done with his uniform cap, his coat, and his sword? He twisted his head about on the pillow to see if he could see them anywhere in the room. A stabbing pain shot through his left shoulder and he gritted his teeth. Of course, she wouldn't leave them in plain sight, he told himself, but where had she put them? A sudden curiosity itched Ridley.

Slowly he raised himself on his right elbow. If he moved carefully his wound didn't hurt, or at least not very much. Deliberately he straightened his right arm until he was sitting up in the bed. He felt weak and a little dizzy but his head was clear. Holding his breath, he removed the counterpane and slowly swung his feet down to the floor. Just across the room there was a door which might be the door to a closet. Ridley swayed to his feet and took a few gingerly steps across the room. Lord, he was weak! But he made it to the door and opened it. It was as he had thought, a closet, and his coat

and cap and his sword were hanging in there.

Ridley closed the door and leaned against it, his curiosity satisfied; then he started back across the room toward the bed. At that moment, he thought he heard a soft step on the stairs. That was funny, thought Ridley. Why should Mary be tiptoeing? Ridley halted in the middle of the floor and stared at the doorway to the hall. The quiet steps came nearer and in a moment a man stood in the doorway.

It was a gaunt, grim-looking Confederate trooper.

"Jest whut I thought!" the man snarled, staring at Ridley's blue trousers. "I knew that gal was talking too fast. Damn Yankee-lovin' little traitor! You come right along with me now, quiet, or I'll blow your damn brains out. I'm a-goin' to take you into Fredericksburg and then I'm goin' to git some of the boys and come back and settle that gal's hash for her. She won't be harborin' any more enemies after we-all gits through with her."

For a moment Riley's mind felt numb. What could he do? Mary Lupton must not suffer for her act of simple kindness to him. And yet how could he, in his weakened state, prevent this cruel-eyed Texan from carrying out his threat? He stepped forward uncertainly.

"As you see, I am unarmed and wounded." He smiled pleasantly, trying to cover the dismay in his heart. "As your prisoner-of-war, I beg you not to punish the lady of this house for an innocent act of charity."

"Shut your mouth, Yankee," the Texan growled. "I don't need yore advice about whut to do with that gal. Come on, walk past me now and down the stairs."

Ridley saw nothing else to do but to obey. At the same time he hoped he could delay leaving the room until he could think of some way of warning Mary.

"It is a little chilly for a man to go around bare from his waist up," he said quietly. "My coat is in that closet. Would you mind getting it for me?"

"Get it yourself," the Texan retorted, "and don't try no stunts."

RIDLEY smiled again and turned and went toward the closet. He had to pass a window and instinctively he glanced

out. Ridley's heart gave a great leap. Outside among the slaves' cabins he saw three or four figures approaching the house cautiously. They were Union soldiers.

Ridley's right hand was trembling but his face was calm as he opened the closet door. He set his cap on his head and then picked up the sword and the coat. He backed out of the closet and held these toward the Confederate trooper.

"I am a captain," he said cheerfully, "therefore I shall want to surrender my sword to an officer of equal rank."

"Well, you can jest forget all of that foofaraw," the Texan snarled, "because there ain't a captain this side of Fredericksburg. My patrol is commanded by a lieutenant. But I snuck back here on my own hook so I guess y'all are jest goin' to have to surrender that sword to me."

Ridley felt a thrill of hope. So this man was the only one who had penetrated Mary Lupton's secret! That simplified matters. All he had to do was to kill this Texan and Mary would be safe. He dared not glance out of the window again for fear that the Texan's curiosity would become aroused, but he dearly wished he knew what those Union soldiers intended to do. He was fairly sure they were the survivors of Company H. If that were the case, he assumed they would be looking for him. Ridley made up his mind. He must hand the sword over to the Texan and go agreeably with him on the chance that as they left the mansion the Union soldiers would rescue him.

The Texan accepted the proffered sword with a grunt but refused to help Ridley put on his coat. The young officer walked out of the bedroom toward the stairs with the coat draped over his left shoulder.

"Quiet!" hissed the Texan behind him as they started down the stairs, and Ridley obeyed, setting one foot carefully after the other. The hallway downstairs was dark and two steps from the bottom Ridley miscalculated his footing. He felt himself step out onto empty air and fell with a clatter to the floor. There was a rapid patter of feet from the back of the house and Mary came rushing in. Quickly her eyes took in Ridley's recumbent form and that of the gaunt Texan with the gun now leveled at her.

"Too bad you had to come in jest now,"

said the Texan. "I was plannin' to leave you and come back later. But now I reckon I'll jest take the both of you along."

Ridley was struggling to his feet. Fortunately he had landed on his uninjured shoulder, but even so the fall had shaken him badly and set his wound to stabbing.

"For Heaven's sake, man!" Ridley said hoarsely, "can't you be human? The girl is not a traitor, she merely followed a kindly impulse."

"Shut yore mouth, Yankee," the Texan said brutally. "Them that ain't fer us is agin us, and by the Lord Harry, I caught this gal harborin' an enemy."

As the Texan turned his head toward Ridley, Mary wheeled and in two steps reached the front door, flung it open, and raced outside. The Texan mouthed a curse and leaped for the door.

"Halt!" he shouted at the fleeing girl, "or I'll shoot!"

"You can't shoot a woman!" Ridley shouted.

"Man or woman, I'll shoot a traitor," roared the Texan, and leveled his revolver.

Just before the trooper fired, Ridley flung himself upon him, and knocked the gun-hand down. As the revolver barked, the Texan lurched backward under Ridley's weight. With a muttered curse he swung the smoking gun-barrel at Ridley's wounded shoulder. Ridley stifled a scream of pain. His knees buckled under him, and he sank to the floor. The Texan stepped back out of the doorway.

"DAMN yore soul, Yankee!" he snarled. "She got away on account of you. I got a good mind to let you have it right here and now."

The Texan's blood-shot eyes glittered as he slowly raised the gun and aimed at Ridley's heart. At that moment a shot rang out. The Texan staggered as if he had been struck by an invisible club. His right hand lowered, the revolver dropped to the ground, an expression of almost comic surprise came into the lean, dark face. Then slowly he leaned forward and toppled in a heap on the ground.

Colin Bogue came running along in front of the house.

"Cap'n dear!" he shouted. "Is it safe you are?"

Ridley wobbled to his feet.

"Thanks to you, Sergeant, it is safe I am."

A moment later, Mary Lupton was standing behind him examining his bandaged shoulder solicitously. A stream of blue uniforms came around the corner of the house, and the survivors of Company H clustered, grinning, about Ridley.

"There is forty-five of us Micks," said Bogue, "which was too tough to be killed off. If you will but lead us, Cap'n dear, we will go and capture Richmond itself."

"No, Sergeant," Ridley smiled. "We'll leave that to a later date. I think right now we will just head north and make a last attempt to cross the river and rejoin our army. But first we have one errand to do."

He turned to Mary Lupton. "Miss Lupton," he said, "I can't believe that this plantation is a safe place for you to stay. Have you no friends or relatives living nearby?"

"My grandparents live in Fredericksburg," the girl started to answer, but Ridley interrupted her.

"Then to Fredericksburg we will escort you," he said. "Perhaps not right into the town itself, but at least within walking distance of your grandparents' home."

Mary Lupton bent a shrewd look at Ridley and said, "But that would be walking right into the arms of your enemies. After all this, are you willing to be captured?"

"No," smiled Ridley, "we will not be captured. But I would like to be on the way as soon as possible."

"Very well," said Mary slowly, "I'll pack a few things and be ready in ten minutes." As the girl went into the house, Ridley turned to face the curious gaze of his men.

"You may think I'm crazy, men, but I think this is our only chance of getting back North. I'm banking on the hunch that the Confederate patrols won't be looking for us so close into Fredericksburg. They are more likely to be hunting farther west. So trust me and I'll do my best to get us out of this."

LESS than half an hour later, a weary, disheveled column of Union soldiers plodded along a back road toward Fredericksburg. At the head of the column, Mary Lupton rode on the dead Texan's horse, and beside her marched Captain John Rid-

ley. Two paces behind him trudged the old Negro, Pompey.

Ridley felt a curious fatalistic sense of calm. He had conceived a plan of dealing with any Confederate soldiers they might meet which on the face of it was completely fantastic. And yet he felt that that plan, because of its simple audacity, had a better chance of succeeding than any other he could think of.

It was almost sunset before he had an opportunity to try out the plan. The weary column was by this time within three miles of Fredericksburg, and they had not seen any Confederate troops since the time they had left the plantation. As they reached the crest of a slight hill, Ridley spotted a cloud of dust over the road several hundred yards in front of them. He halted the column and spoke to them as follows:

"Men, I told you you would have to trust me. Don't be amazed by anything I do, but stand right in your tracks with your guns at parade rest and obey only my orders."

The men looked at each other in mystification and Mary Lupton's face wore an expression of bewilderment. In front of them the dust cloud drew nearer and distant tramping of hoofs was heard. In a few minutes a strong force of Confederate cavalrymen rounded the bend in the road. There was a great shout from them as they spied the blue column, but Ridley was ready. He strolled forward coolly to meet them. His sword rose high in his right hand. A white handkerchief was fastened to the end of the blade. A dozen Confederate horsemen reined up around him about thirty paces from the head of the Union column.

"Order yo' men to lay down their arms immediately, suh!" cried one of the Confederates.

"I beg your pardon, sir," Ridley replied with a smile. "This is not a surrender, this is a parley. I am Captain Ridley, Company H, Ninety-ninth, New York, and whom have I the honor of addressing?"

The Confederate officer stared incredulously down at Ridley.

"Excuse me, suh," he said, "but are you crazy? You are quite at our mercy, and you must either surrender or die."

"I agree with you, sir," Ridley smiled, "that we are at your mercy, but when I explain to you the circumstances of our meeting, perhaps you will agree with me that we have another choice beside surrendering or dying. Again may I ask whom I have the honor of addressing?"

The Confederate officer gasped and looked around at his men, and looked again down at Ridley. Then he slowly swung a leg over his horse's back and dismounted.

"You are certainly the coolest Yankee it has ever been my pleasure to meet," said he, walking toward Ridley. "And I must say that you have the manners and tone of a gentleman, suh. I am Lieutenant Wyatt of the Second Virginia Cavalry."

Ridley executed a formal bow, then straightened up and looked straight into the Confederate officer's puzzled eyes.

"I am indeed," he said, "fortunate to meet a Virginia gentleman at this time, because no less a man could appreciate my situation. It is this: my company, which has been cut off from the main army, came by a plantation earlier this day and found a Texan cavalryman ill-using the lady of the plantation. He was, in fact, firing at her with his pistol. Obviously, Lieutenant, he was a common ruffian and we dealt with him accordingly, as we should have done even if he had worn a blue uniform, instead of a gray one."

Disbelief was written all over the Confederate officer's face, and Ridley's heart missed a beat. Would his strategy work out?

"It was obviously unsafe for the lady to stay on at the plantation, so I offered to make a detour on my way North, and escort her to the nearest Confederate patrol, even if we had to go all the way to Fredericksburg. If you will come with me, sir, I will present you to Miss Mary Lupton, and give her into your care."

"Mary Lupton!" shouted the Confederate officer. "Why, she's my first cousin!"

RIDLEY began to breathe easier as young Wyatt ran forward and greeted Mary. Not that the situation was not still very precarious. The Confederate cavalrymen moved up the road suspiciously, and the Irish of Company H

stirred restlessly in their ranks. After a minute, Wyatt swung around and faced Ridley.

"Cap'n," he said, and Ridley caught a fleeting, enigmatic smile on Mary's face, "Cap'n, Miss Lupton has confirmed every word of your story. You have been the very soul of honor, suh, and I wish they was some way for me to return your courtesy."

"Thank you, Lieutenant," said Ridley, playing his last card, "but I believe we are still at war with each other. I would deem it a great favor if you would grant me ten minutes' grace to retire my command into a defensive position to receive your attack."

"By God, suh!" said Wyatt, warmly, "I can do better than that. I can ride back to Fredericksburg with Miss Lupton and come back looking for you after I have seen her safely with her grand-parents. I cain't exactly help it if, while I'm off on that errand, you have moved your command across yonder field down to the Rappahannock and crossed it on some boats I happen to remember are tied up theah. As you have observed, suh, we are still at war with each other, so it will be my duty to pursue you and either capture or destroy your force, or drive it back to the Federal lines this side of Warrenton. I think probably," Wyatt concluded with a faint smile, "that I won't be able to catch up with you for, say, another two hours."

"For your noble generosity to an enemy, Lieutenant, my deepest thanks," said Ridley, but Mary Lupton knew perfectly that the words were being addressed to her. "If I survive this terrible war, my first action when it is over, will be to seek you out and offer my hand in friendship."

"I should be pleased and honored if you did so," said Wyatt heartily.

Ridley turned to Mary, dropped his sabre, and lifted his right hand to her. She held his hand in a warm grip, looking straight into his eyes.

"And I, too," said she softly, "Until we meet again, Captain Ridley." "Until we meet again—Mary Lupton."

Ridley stood in the middle of the road and watched the gray-clad cavalcade trotting away, Mary in their midst. At the bend of the road she turned in the saddle and raised her hand in a lingering gesture

of farewell before she disappeared behind the trees. Colin Bogue came up and stood beside Ridley.

"Cap'n dear," he boomed, "it's the charmed tongue you have."

"It's the hurt shoulder I have," Ridley answered, swaying with exhaustion. "Take charge, Sergeant, and get us across the river."

Punctually two hours later, as the survivors of Company H hurried along the road from Falmouth to Warrenton, the rear ranks passed the word up ahead that a cloud of dust could be seen behind them.

Ridley called a halt, and sat up on the improvised litter in which he had been carried. He decided that he was strong enough to walk, so, getting to his feet, he led the company into a young orchard close beside the road.

"Cap'n, I misdoubt we have more than three rounds left per man," said Bogue.

"Then we must make every bullet count," said Ridley, "and be ready for them with the bayonet. Their horses will be at a disadvantage among these young trees."

The Confederates, racing up the road, spied them and reined up a hundred yards away. A lone horseman trotted forward, hand upraised. It was Lieutenant Wyatt.

"Yield yourselves prisoners to the Confederate States of America!" he shouted.

"Come and get us!" Ridley shouted back.

THE Confederate officer flourished his hat and rode back to his men. The gray horsemen fanned out onto the fields on both sides of the road. Then, with a shrill cheer, they charged the orchard. Company H held its fire until the gray troopers were only twenty-five yards away. Then the orchard came to life as forty-five rifles spat well-directed lead at the oncoming horsemen. More than thirty Confederates were hit as a result of the point-blank volley, but the rest came on without hesitation. The weary Irish tensed themselves for a last effort. Bayonets, held high, dipped and thrust as the Confederate horses plunged into the orchard. Ridley backed up against a slender tree trunk and roared encouragement to his men. For the moment he forgot his wound and slashed gamely at a huge gray-clad trooper.

For a few brief minutes it was bayonet against sabre, and in the end bayonet pre-

vailed. As Ridley had predicted, the cavalrymen were at a disadvantage among the young trees, and the Confederate troopers could not long stand up against the Celtic fury of the Union troops. The gray horsemen withdrew as suddenly as they had charged and cantered away to re-form for another charge.

"Load! Load!" shouted Ridley, miraculously unhurt. "They will be coming back for more in a minute."

He ran anxiously among his men, estimating the results of the first charge. He had lost at least twelve men, but the Confederate dead and wounded in the orchard amounted to more than twenty. They had lost heavily in that first volley. But now the Confederates had re-formed and were trotting forward toward the orchard. Ridley's heart sank into his boots as he watched them coming on. There were more of them than he had reckoned on, certainly well over a hundred men. Quickly, Ridley weighed the choice of resisting or surrendering. He knew that his little force could not hold out indefinitely against three to one odds, especially when their ammunition was running out. But then Ridley realized that if it was senseless to keep on resisting, well then, war itself was senseless, and somehow there was a point of honor involved here.

"Fire!" he roared, and once again a volley rang out from the blood-soaked orchard. A dozen or so gray-clad riders fell but the rest swept relentlessly forward. Once again the Irish braced themselves. But to their astonishment and Ridley's, the Confederates

ates suddenly reined up, shouting and pointing. And a moment later they turned around and galloped off across the fields. Ridley twisted his head around and gasped. Behind them, down the road from Warrenton, poured score on score of blue-clad cavalrymen.

The orchard rang with the cheer of the Irish as the Union horsemen thundered past in hot pursuit of the fast-fleeing Confederates.

Twenty minutes later the Federal Squadron was back again gazing open-mouthed down at the bloody, bedraggled handful of Irish.

"Company H of the Ninety-ninth New York!" exclaimed the cavalry captain. "Why, we heard you had been cut off and annihilated."

"Cut off perhaps," said Ridley with an unsteady smile, "but, as you see, not quite annihilated. Perhaps we would have been, though, if you hadn't come along at the right moment."

"I doubt it," said the cavalry captain slowly, "as far as I can see, you have been holding off the whole Confederate army for twenty-four hours. If we had a few more companies like yours in the Union army, we could finish up this war in no time."

"Thank you, Captain," said Ridley, "for your fine compliment. I think it would be an excellent idea to finish up this war as soon as possible. Because as soon as it is over, I have a rendezvous in Fredericksburg."



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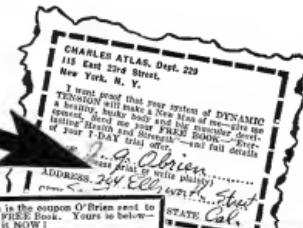
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